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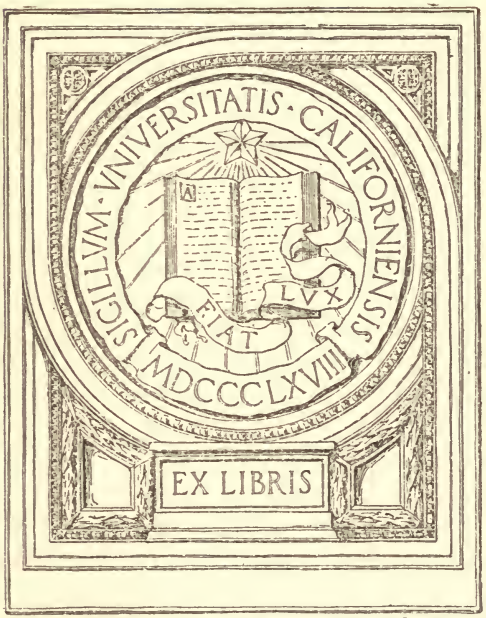
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The Writings of Bret Harte

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Stories of California and the Frontier

A WAIF OF THE PLAINS

AND OTHER TALES

BY

BRET HARTE

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BOSTON AND NEW YORK
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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The present Volume contains a serial in Three Volumes, of which *A Waif of the Plains* is the first, *Susy* the second, and *Clarence* the third. While I have tried to make this fact by no means essential to the general reader's understanding of or interest in any one part, nevertheless, in connecting them, I may have been compelled to some repetition which the reader of the serial may resent as superfluous. It was my intention to give the consecutive history of one or two characters in those natural episodes of experience indicated by childhood, youth, and maturity, yet with each episode complete as a story in itself. It was my belief that these natural divisions were quite as consistent with real life as the usual extended biography, culminating in the death of the hero, or the milder oblivion of marriage. How far this experiment has been successful must be left to the reader to judge. But I shall be quite content if I have only offered a contribution towards the solution of the much vexed question of the utility of the three-volume novel.

In the pages of *Clarence* I am conscious of making a more serious experiment. I have ventured to touch upon an episode of American history which I believe to be singularly rich in dramatic and picturesque material, but which is still so near to the memory of the reader that it may seem to lack the glamour of romantic perspective as well as accuracy of settled historic proportion. This may be especially true of the one or two portraits I have attempted

to give of personages already historic — yet painted by the hand of a contemporary. But, here again, I shall be quite content if I have only offered a suggestion to the coming American novelist who shall enjoy that remoter and more artistic distance.

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A WAIF OF THE PLAINS AND OTHER TALES

A WAIF OF THE PLAINS

CHAPTER I

A LONG level of dull gray that further away became a faint blue, with here and there darker patches that looked like water. At times an open space, blackened and burnt in an irregular circle, with a shred of newspaper, an old rag, or broken tin can lying in the ashes. Beyond these always a low dark line that seemed to sink into the ground at night, and rose again in the morning with the first light, but never otherwise changed its height and distance. A sense of always moving with some indefinite purpose, but of always returning at night to the same place — with the same surroundings, the same people, the same bedclothes, and the same awful black canopy dropped down from above. A chalky taste of dust on the mouth and lips, a gritty sense of earth on the fingers, and an all-pervading heat and smell of cattle.

This was "The Great Plains" as they seemed to two children from the hooded depth of an emigrant wagon, above the swaying heads of toiling oxen, in the summer of 1852.

It had appeared so to them for two weeks, always the same and always without the least sense to them of wonder or monotony. When they viewed it from the road, walking

beside the wagon, there was only the team itself added to the unvarying picture. One of the wagons bore on its canvas hood the inscription, in large black letters, "Off to California!" on the other "Root, Hog, or Die," but neither of them awoke in the minds of the children the faintest idea of playfulness or jocularity. Perhaps it was difficult to connect the serious men, who occasionally walked beside them and seemed to grow more taciturn and depressed as the day wore on, with this past effusive pleasantry.

Yet the impressions of the two children differed slightly. The eldest, a boy of eleven, was apparently new to the domestic habits and customs of a life to which the younger, a girl of seven, was evidently native and familiar. The food was coarse and less skillfully prepared than that to which he had been accustomed. There was a certain freedom and roughness in their intercourse, a simplicity that bordered almost on rudeness in their domestic arrangements, and a speech that was at times almost untranslatable to him. He slept in his clothes, wrapped up in blankets; he was conscious that in the matter of cleanliness he was left to himself to overcome the difficulties of finding water and towels. But it is doubtful if in his youthfulness it affected him more than a novelty. He ate and slept well, and found his life amusing. Only at times the rudeness of his companions, or, worse, an indifference that made him feel his dependency upon them, awoke a vague sense of some wrong that had been done to him which, while it was voiceless to all others and even uneasily put aside by himself, was still always slumbering in his childish consciousness.

To the party he was known as an orphan put on the train at "St. Jo" by some relative of his stepmother, to be delivered to another relative at Sacramento. As his stepmother had not even taken leave of him, but had en-

trusted his departure to the relative with whom he had been lately living, it was considered as an act of "riddance," and accepted as such by her party, and even vaguely acquiesced in by the boy himself. What consideration had been offered for his passage he did not know; he only remembered that he had been told "to make himself handy." This he had done cheerfully, if at times with the unskillfulness of a novice; but it was not a peculiar or a menial task in a company where all took part in manual labor, and where existence seemed to him to bear the charm of a prolonged picnic. Neither was he subjected to any difference of affection or treatment from Mrs. Silsbee, the mother of his little companion, and the wife of the leader of the train. Prematurely old, of ill health, and harassed with cares, she had no time to waste in discriminating maternal tenderness for her daughter, but treated the children with equal and unbiased querulousness.

The rear wagon creaked, swayed, and rolled on slowly and heavily. The hoofs of the draught-oxen, occasionally striking in the dust with a dull report, sent little puffs like smoke on either side of the track. Within, the children were playing "keeping store." The little girl, as an opulent and extravagant customer, was purchasing of the boy, who sat behind a counter improvised from a nail-keg and the front seat, most of the available contents of the wagon, either under their own names or an imaginary one as the moment suggested, and paying for them in the easy and liberal currency of dried beans and bits of paper. Change was given by the expeditious method of tearing the paper into smaller fragments. The diminution of stock was remedied by buying the same article over again under a different name. Nevertheless, in spite of these favorable commercial conditions, the market seemed dull.

"I can show you a fine quality of sheeting at four cents a yard, double width," said the boy, rising and leaning on

his fingers on the counter as he had seen the shopmen do. "All wool and will wash," he added, with easy gravity.

"I can buy it cheaper at Jackson's," said the girl, with the intuitive duplicity of her bargaining sex.

"Very well," said the boy. "I won't play any more."

"Who cares?" said the girl indifferently.

The boy here promptly upset the counter; the rolled-up blanket which had deceitfully represented the desirable sheeting falling on the wagon floor. It apparently suggested a new idea to the former salesman. "I say! let's play 'damaged stock.' See, I'll tumble all the things down here right on top o' the others, and sell 'em for less than cost."

The girl looked up. The suggestion was bold, bad, and momentarily attractive. But she only said "No," apparently from habit, picked up her doll, and the boy clambered to the front of the wagon. The incomplete episode terminated at once with that perfect forgetfulness, indifference, and irresponsibility common to all young animals. If either could have flown away or bounded off finally at that moment, they would have done so with no more concern for preliminary detail than a bird or squirrel. The wagon rolled steadily on. The boy could see that one of their teamsters had climbed up on the tail-board of the preceding vehicle. The other seemed to be walking in a dusty sleep.

"Kla'uns," said the girl.

The boy, without turning his head, responded, "Susy."

"Wot are you going to be?" said the girl.

"Goin' to be?" repeated Clarence.

"When you is growed," explained Susy.

Clarence hesitated. His settled determination had been to become a pirate, merciless yet discriminating. But reading in a bethumbed "Guide to the Plains" that morning of Fort Laramie and Kit Carson, he had decided upon

the career of a "scout," as being more accessible and requiring less water. Yet, out of compassion for Susy's possible ignorance, he said neither, and responded with the American boy's modest conventionality, "President." It was safe, required no embarrassing description, and had been approved by benevolent old gentlemen with their hands on his head.

"I'm goin' to be a parson's wife," said Susy, "and keep hens, and have things giv' to me. Baby clothes, and apples, and apple sass — and melasses ! and more baby clothes! and pork when you kill."

She had thrown herself at the bottom of the wagon, with her back towards him and her doll in her lap. He could see the curve of her curly head, and beyond, her bare dimpled knees, which were raised, and over which she was trying to fold the hem of her brief skirt.

"I would n't be a President's wife," she said presently.

"You could n't!"

"Could if I wanted to!"

"Could n't!"

"Could now!"

"Could n't!"

"Why?"

Finding it difficult to explain his convictions of her ineligibility, Clarence thought it equally crushing not to give any. There was a long silence. It was very hot and dusty. The wagon scarcely seemed to move. Clarence gazed at the vignette of the track behind them formed by the hood of the rear. Presently he rose and walked past her to the tail-board. "Goin' to get down," he said, putting his legs over.

"Maw says 'No,'" said Susy.

Clarence did not reply, but dropped to the ground beside the slowly turning wheels. Without quickening his pace he could easily keep his hand on the tail-board.

"Kla'uns."

He looked up.

"Take me."

She had already clapped on her sunbonnet and was standing at the edge of the tail-board, her little arms extended in such perfect confidence of being caught that the boy could not resist. He caught her cleverly. They halted a moment and let the lumbering vehicle move away from them, as it swayed from side to side as if laboring in a heavy sea. They remained motionless until it had reached nearly a hundred yards, and then, with a sudden half-real, half-assumed, but altogether delightful trepidation, ran forward and caught up with it again. This they repeated two or three times until both themselves and the excitement were exhausted, and they again plodded on hand in hand. Presently Clarence uttered a cry.

"My! Susy look there!"

The rear wagon had once more slipped away from them a considerable distance. Between it and them, crossing its track, a most extraordinary creature had halted.

At first glance it seemed a dog — a discomfited, shameless, ownerless outcast of streets and byways, rather than an honest stray of some drover's train. It was so gaunt, so dusty, so greasy, so slouching, and so lazy! But as they looked at it more intently they saw that the grayish hair of its back had a bristly ridge, and there were great poisonous-looking dark blotches on its flanks, and that the slouch of its haunches was a peculiarity of its figure, and not the cowering of fear. As it lifted its suspicious head towards them they could see that its thin lips, too short to cover its white teeth, were curled in a perpetual sneer.

"Here, doggie!" said Clarence excitedly. "Good dog! Come."

Susy burst into a triumphant laugh. "Et tain't no dog, silly; it 's er coyote."

Clarence blushed. It was n't the first time the pioneer's daughter had shown her superior knowledge. He said quickly, to hide his discomfiture, "I 'll ketch him, anyway; he 's nothin' mor'n a ki yi."

"Ye can't, though," said Susy, shaking her sunbonnet. "He 's faster nor a hoss!"

Nevertheless, Clarence ran towards him, followed by Susy. When they had come within twenty feet of him, the lazy creature, without apparently the least effort, took two or three limping bounds to one side, and remained at the same distance as before. They repeated this onset three or four times with more or less excitement and hilarity, the animal evading them to one side, but never actually retreating before them. Finally, it occurred to them both that although they were not catching him they were not driving him away. The consequences of that thought were put into shape by Susy with round-eyed significance.

"Kla'uns, he bites."

Clarence picked up a hard sun-baked clod, and, running forward, threw it at the coyote. It was a clever shot, and struck him on his slouching haunches. He snapped, and gave a short snarling yelp, and vanished. Clarence returned with a victorious air to his companion. But she was gazing intently in the opposite direction, and for the first time he discovered that the coyote had been leading them half round a circle.

"Kla'uns," says Susy, with a hysterical little laugh.

"Well?"

"The wagon 's gone."

Clarence started. It was true. Not only their wagon, but the whole train of oxen and teamsters had utterly disappeared, vanishing as completely as if they had been caught up in a whirlwind or engulfed in the earth! Even the low cloud of dust that usually marked their distant course by day was nowhere to be seen. The long level

plain stretched before them to the setting sun, without a sign or trace of moving life or animation. That great blue crystal bowl, filled with dust and fire by day, with stars and darkness by night, which had always seemed to drop its rim round them everywhere and shut them in, seemed to them now to have been lifted to let the train pass out, and then closed down upon them forever.

CHAPTER II

THEIR first sensation was one of purely animal freedom. They looked at each other with sparkling eyes and long silent breaths. But this spontaneous outburst of savage nature soon passed. Susy's little hand presently reached forward and clutched Clarence's jacket. The boy understood it, and said quickly: —

"They ain't gone far, and they 'll stop as soon as they find us gone."

They trotted on a little faster; the sun they had followed every day and the fresh wagon tracks being their unfailing guides; the keen, cool air of the plains, taking the place of that all-pervading dust and smell of the perspiring oxen, invigorating them with its breath.

"We ain't skeered a bit, are we?" said Susy.

"What 's there to be afraid of?" said Clarence scornfully. He said this none the less strongly because he suddenly remembered that they had been often left alone in the wagon for hours without being looked after, and that their absence might not be noticed until the train stopped to encamp at dusk, two hours later. They were not running very fast, yet either they were more tired than they knew, or the air was thinner, for they both seemed to breathe quickly. Suddenly Clarence stopped.

"There they are now."

He was pointing to a light cloud of dust in the far-off horizon, from which the black hulk of a wagon emerged for a moment and was lost. But even as they gazed the cloud seemed to sink like a fairy mirage to the earth again,

the whole train disappeared, and only the empty stretching track returned. They did not know that this seemingly flat and level plain was really undulatory, and that the vanished train had simply dipped below their view on some further slope even as it had once before. But they knew they were disappointed, and that disappointment revealed to them the fact that they had concealed it from each other. The girl was the first to succumb, and burst into a quick spasm of angry tears. That single act of weakness called out the boy's pride and strength. There was no longer an equality of suffering; he had become her protector; he felt himself responsible for both. Considering her no longer his equal, he was no longer frank with her.

"There 's nothin' to boo-hoo for," he said, with a half-affected brusqueness. "So quit, now! They 'll stop in a minit, and send some one back for us. Should n't wonder if they 're doin' it now."

But Susy, with feminine discrimination detecting the hollow ring in his voice, here threw herself upon him and began to beat him violently with her little fists. "They ain't! They ain't! They ain't! You know it! How dare you?" Then, exhausted with her struggles, she suddenly threw herself flat on the dry grass, shut her eyes tightly, and clutched at the stubble.

"Get up," said the boy, with a pale, determined face that seemed to have got much older.

"You leave me be," said Susy.

"Do you want me to go away and leave you?" asked the boy.

Susy opened one blue eye furtively in the secure depths of her sunbonnet, and gazed at his changed face.

"Ye-e-s."

He pretended to turn away, but really to look at the height of the sinking sun.

"Kla'uns!"

"Well?"

"Take me."

She was holding up her hands. He lifted her gently in his arms, dropping her head over his shoulder. "Now," he said cheerfully, "you keep a good lookout that way, and I this, and we 'll soon be there."

The idea seemed to please her. After Clarence had stumbled on for a few moments, she said, "Do you see anything, Kla'uns?"

"Not yet."

"No more don't I." This equality of perception apparently satisfied her. Presently she lay more limp in his arms. She was asleep.

The sun was sinking lower; it had already touched the edge of the horizon, and was level with his dazzled and straining eyes. At times it seemed to impede his eager search and task his vision. Haze and black spots floated across the horizon, and round wafers, like duplicates of the sun, glittered back from the dull surface of the plains. Then he resolved to look no more until he had counted fifty, a hundred, but always with the same result, the return of the empty, unending plains — the disk growing redder as it neared the horizon, the fire it seemed to kindle as it sank, but nothing more!

Staggering under his burden, he tried to distract himself by fancying how the discovery of their absence would be made. He heard the listless, half-querulous discussion about the locality that regularly pervaded the nightly camp. He heard the discontented voice of Jake Silsbee as he halted beside their wagon, and said, "Come out o' that now, you two, and mighty quick about it." He heard the command harshly repeated. He saw the look of irritation on Silsbee's dusty, bearded face, that followed his hurried glance into the empty wagon. He heard the

query, "What 's gone o' them limbs now?" handed from wagon to wagon. He heard a few oaths; Mrs. Silsbee's high rasping voice, abuse of himself, the hurried and discontented detachment of a search party, Silsbee and one of the hired men, and vociferation and blame. Blame always for himself, the elder, who might have "known better!" A little fear, perhaps, but he could not fancy either pity or commiseration. Perhaps the thought upheld his pride; under the prospect of sympathy he might have broken down.

At last he stumbled, and stopped to keep himself from falling forward on his face. He could go no further; his breath was spent; he was dripping with perspiration; his legs were trembling under him; there was a roaring in his ears; round red disks of the sun were scattered everywhere around him like spots of blood. To the right of the trail there seemed to be a slight mound where he could rest awhile, and yet keep his watchful survey of the horizon. But on reaching it he found that it was only a tangle of taller mesquite grass, into which he sank with his burden. Nevertheless, if useless as a point of vantage, it afforded a soft couch for Susy, who seemed to have fallen quite naturally into her usual afternoon siesta, and in a measure it shielded her from a cold breeze that had sprung up from the west. Utterly exhausted himself, but not daring to yield to the torpor that seemed to be creeping over him, Clarence half sat, half knelt down beside her, supporting himself with one hand, and, partly hidden in the long grass, kept his straining eyes fixed on the lonely track.

The red disk was sinking lower. It seemed to have already crumbled away a part of the distance with its eating fires. As it sank still lower, it shot out long, luminous rays, diverging fanlike across the plain, as if, in the boy's excited fancy, it, too, were searching for the lost strays. And as one long beam seemed to linger over his

hiding-place, he even thought that it might serve as a guide to Silsbee and the other seekers, and was constrained to stagger to his feet, erect in its light. But it soon sank, and with it Clarence dropped back again to his crouching watch. Yet he knew that the daylight was still good for an hour, and with the withdrawal of that mystic sunset glory objects became even more distinct and sharply defined than at any other time. And with the merciful sheathing of that flaming sword which seemed to have waved between him and the vanished train, his eyes already felt a blessed relief.

CHAPTER III

With the setting of the sun an ominous silence fell. He could hear the low breathing of Susy, and even fancied he could hear the beating of his own heart in that oppressive hush of all nature. For the day's march had always been accompanied by the monotonous creaking of wheels and axles, and even the quiet of the night encampment had been always more or less broken by the movement of unquiet sleepers on the wagon beds, or the breathing of the cattle. But here there was neither sound nor motion. Susy's prattle, and even the sound of his own voice, would have broken the benumbing spell, but it was part of his growing self-denial now that he refrained from waking her even by a whisper. She would awaken soon enough to thirst and hunger, perhaps, and then what was he to do? If that looked-for help would only come now — while she still slept. For it was part of his boyish fancy that if he could deliver her asleep, and undemonstrative of fear and suffering, he would be less blameful, and she less mindful of her trouble. If it did not come — but he would not think of that yet! If she was thirsty meantime — well, it might rain, and there was always the dew which they used to brush off the morning grass; he would take off his shirt and catch it in that, like a shipwrecked mariner. It would be funny, and make her laugh. For himself he would not laugh; he felt he was getting very old and grown up in this loneliness.

It was getting darker — they should be looking into the wagons now. A new doubt began to assail him. Ought

he not, now that he was rested, make the most of the remaining moments of daylight, and before the glow faded from the west, when he would no longer have any bearings to guide him? But there was always the risk of waking her! — to what? The fear of being confronted again with *her* fear, and of being unable to pacify her, at last decided him to remain. But he crept softly through the grass, and in the dust of the track traced the four points of the compass, as he could still determine them by the sunset light, with a large printed W to indicate the west! This boyish contrivance particularly pleased him. If he had only had a pole, a stick, or even a twig, on which to tie his handkerchief and erect it above the clump of mesquite as a signal to the searchers in case he should be overcome by fatigue or sleep, he would have been happy. But the plain was barren of brush or timber; he did not dream that this omission and the very unobtrusiveness of his hiding-place would be his salvation from a greater danger.

With the coming darkness the wind arose and swept the plain with a long-drawn sigh. This increased to a murmur, till presently the whole expanse — before sunk in awful silence — seemed to awake with vague complaints, incessant sounds, and low moanings. At times he thought he heard the halloaing of distant voices, at times it seemed as a whisper in his own ear. In the silence that followed each blast he fancied he could detect the creaking of the wagon, the dull thud of the oxen's hoofs, or broken fragments of speech, blown and scattered even as he strained his ears to listen by the next gust. This tension of the ear began to confuse his brain, as his eyes had been previously dazzled by the sunlight, and a strange torpor began to steal over his faculties. Once or twice his head dropped.

He awoke with a start. A moving figure had suddenly uplifted itself between him and the horizon! It was not twenty yards away, so clearly outlined against the still

luminous sky that it seemed even nearer. A human figure, but so disheveled, so fantastic, and yet so mean and puerile in its extravagance that it seemed the outcome of a childish dream. It was a mounted figure, but so ludicrously disproportionate to the pony it bestrode, whose slim legs were stiffly buried in the dust in a breathless halt, that it might have been a straggler from some vulgar wandering circus. A tall hat, crownless and brimless, a castaway of civilization, surmounted by a turkey's feather, was on its head; over its shoulders hung a dirty tattered blanket that scarcely covered the two painted legs which seemed clothed in soiled yellow hose. In one hand it held a gun; the other was bent above its eyes in eager scrutiny of some distant point beyond and west of the spot where the children lay concealed. Presently, with a dozen quick noiseless strides of the pony's legs, the apparition moved to the right, its gaze still fixed on that mysterious part of the horizon. There was no mistaking it now! The painted Hebraic face, the large curved nose, the bony cheek, the broad mouth, the shadowed eyes, the straight long matted locks! It was an Indian! Not the picturesque creature of Clarence's imagination, but still an Indian! The boy was uneasy, suspicious, antagonistic, but not afraid. He looked at the heavy animal face with the superiority of intelligence, at the half-naked figure with the conscious supremacy of dress, at the lower individuality with the contempt of a higher race. Yet a moment after, when the figure wheeled and disappeared towards the undulating west, a strange chill crept over him. Yet he did not know that in this puerile phantom and painted pygmy the awful majesty of Death had passed him by.

"Mamma!"

It was Susy's voice, struggling into consciousness. Perhaps she had been instinctively conscious of the boy's sudden fears.

It was an Indian

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"Hush!"

He had just turned to the objective point of the Indian's gaze. There *was* something! A dark line was moving along with the gathering darkness. For a moment he hardly dared to voice his thoughts even to himself. It was a following train overtaking them from the rear! And from the rapidity of its movements a train with horses, hurrying forward to evening camp. He had never dreamt of help from that quarter. This was what the Indian's keen eyes had been watching, and why he had so precipitately fled.

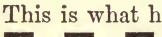
The strange train was now coming up at a round trot. It was evidently well appointed, with five or six large wagons and several outriders. In half an hour it would be here. Yet he refrained from waking Susy, who had fallen asleep again; his old superstition of securing her safety first being still uppermost. He took off his jacket to cover her shoulders, and rearranged her nest. Then he glanced again at the coming train. But for some unaccountable reason it had changed its direction, and instead of following the track that should have brought it to his side it had turned off to the left! In ten minutes it would pass abreast of him a mile and a half away! If he woke Susy now, he knew she would be helpless in her terror, and he could not carry her half that distance. He might rush to the train himself and return with help, but he would never leave her alone — in the darkness. Never! If she woke she would die of fright, perhaps, or wander blindly and aimlessly away. No! The train would pass, and with it that hope of rescue. Something was in his throat, but he gulped it down and was quiet again, albeit he shivered in the night wind.

The train was nearly abreast of him now. He ran out of the tall grass, waving his straw hat above his head in the faint hope of attracting attention. But he did not go

far, for he found to his alarm that when he turned back again the clump of mesquite was scarcely distinguishable from the rest of the plain. This settled all question of his going. Even if he reached the train and returned with some one, how would he ever find her again in this desolate expanse?

He watched the train slowly pass — still mechanically, almost hopelessly, waving his hat as he ran up and down before the mesquite, as if he were waving a last farewell to his departing hope. Suddenly it appeared to him that three of the outriders who were preceding the first wagon had changed their shape. They were no longer sharp, oblong, black blocks against the horizon, but had become at first blurred and indistinct, then taller and narrower, until at last they stood out like exclamation points against the sky. He continued to wave his hat, they continued to grow taller and narrower. He understood it now — the three transformed blocks were the outriders coming towards him.

This is what he had seen —



This is what he saw now —

! ! !

He ran back to Susy to see if she still slept, for his foolish desire to have her saved unconsciously was stronger than ever now that safety seemed so near. She was still sleeping, although she had moved slightly. He ran to the front again.

The outriders had apparently halted. What were they doing? Why would n't they come on?

Suddenly a blinding flash of light seemed to burst from one of them. Away over his head something whistled like a rushing bird, and sped off invisible. They had fired a gun; they were signaling to him — Clarence — like a grown-up man. He would have given his life at that

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moment to have had a gun. But he could only wave his hat frantically.

One of the figures here bore away and impetuously darted forward again. He was coming nearer, powerful, gigantic, formidable, as he loomed through the darkness. All at once he threw up his arm with a wild gesture to the others; and his voice, manly, frank, and assuring, came ringing before him.

"Hold up! Good God! It 's no Injin — it 's a child!"

In another moment he had reined up beside Clarence and leaned over him, bearded, handsome, powerful, and protecting.

"Hallo! What 's all this? What are you doing here?"

"Lost from Mr. Silsbee's train," said Clarence, pointing to the darkened west.

"Lost? — how long?"

"About three hours. I thought they 'd come back for us," said Clarence apologetically to this big, kindly man.

"And you kalkilated to wait here for 'em?"

"Yes, yes — I did — till I saw you."

"Then why in thunder did n't you light out straight for us, instead of hanging round here and drawing us out?"

The boy hung his head. He knew his reasons were unchanged, but all at once they seemed very foolish and unmanly to speak out.

"Only that we were on the keen jump for Injins," continued the stranger, "we would n't have seen you at all, and might hev shot you when we did. What possessed you to stay here?"

The boy was still silent. "Kla'uns," said a faint, sleepy voice from the mesquite, "take me." The rifle-shot had awakened Susy.

The stranger turned quickly towards the sound. Clarence started and recalled himself. "There," he said bitterly, "you 've done it now, you 've wakened her! *That 's*

far, for he found to his alarm that when he turned back again the clump of mesquite was scarcely distinguishable from the rest of the plain. This settled all question of his going. Even if he reached the train and returned with some one, how would he ever find her again in this desolate expanse?

He watched the train slowly pass — still mechanically, almost hopelessly, waving his hat as he ran up and down before the mesquite, as if he were waving a last farewell to his departing hope. Suddenly it appeared to him that three of the outriders who were preceding the first wagon had changed their shape. They were no longer sharp, oblong, black blocks against the horizon, but had become at first blurred and indistinct, then taller and narrower, until at last they stood out like exclamation points against the sky. He continued to wave his hat, they continued to grow taller and narrower. He understood it now — the three transformed blocks were the outriders coming towards him.

This is what he had seen —

This is what he saw now —

! ! !

He ran back to Susy to see if she still slept, for his foolish desire to have her saved unconsciously was stronger than ever now that safety seemed so near. She was still sleeping, although she had moved slightly. He ran to the front again.

The outriders had apparently halted. What were they doing? Why would n't they come on?

Suddenly a blinding flash of light seemed to burst from one of them. Away over his head something whistled like a rushing bird, and sped off invisible. They had fired a gun; they were signaling to him — Clarence — like a grown-up man. He would have given his life at that

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moment to have had a gun. But he could only wave his hat frantically.

One of the figures here bore away and impetuously darted forward again. He was coming nearer, powerful, gigantic, formidable, as he loomed through the darkness. All at once he threw up his arm with a wild gesture to the others; and his voice, manly, frank, and assuring, came ringing before him.

"Hold up! Good God! It 's no Injin — it 's a child!"

In another moment he had reined up beside Clarence and leaned over him, bearded, handsome, powerful, and protecting.

"Hallo! What 's all this? What are you doing here?"

"Lost from Mr. Silsbee's train," said Clarence, pointing to the darkened west.

"Lost? — how long?"

"About three hours. I thought they 'd come back for us," said Clarence apologetically to this big, kindly man.

"And you kalkilated to wait here for 'em?"

"Yes, yes — I did — till I saw you."

"Then why in thunder did n't you light out straight for us, instead of hanging round here and drawing us out?"

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why I stayed. I could n't carry her over there to you. I could n't let her walk, for she 'd be frightened. I would n't wake her up, for she 'd be frightened, and I might n't find her again. There!" He had made up his mind to be abused, but he was reckless now that she was safe.

The men glanced at each other. "Then," said the spokesman quietly, "you did n't strike out for us on account of your sister?"

"She ain't my sister," said Clarence quickly. "She 's a little girl. She 's Mrs. Silsbee's little girl. We were in the wagon and got down. It 's my fault. I helped her down."

The three men reined their horses closely round him, leaning forward from their saddles, with their hands on their knees and their heads on one side. "Then," said the spokesman gravely, "you just reckoned to stay here, old man, and take your chances with her rather than run the risk of frightening or leaving her — though it was your one chance of life!"

"Yes," said the boy, scornful of this feeble, grown-up repetition.

"Come here."

The boy came doggedly forward. The man pushed back the well-worn straw hat from Clarence's forehead and looked into his lowering face. With his hand still on the boy's head he turned him round to the others, and said quietly: —

"Suthin' of a pup, eh?"

"You bet," they responded.

The voice was not unkindly, although the speaker had thrown his lower jaw forward as to pronounce the word "pup" with a humorous suggestion of a mastiff. Before Clarence could make up his mind if the epithet was insulting or not, the man put out his stirruped foot, and, with a gesture of invitation, said, "Jump up."

"But Susy," said Clarence, drawing back.

"Look; she 's making up to Phil already."

Clarence looked. Susy had crawled out of the mesquite, and with her sunbonnet hanging down her back, her curls tossed around her face, still flushed with sleep, and Clarence's jacket over her shoulders, was gazing up with grave satisfaction in the laughing eyes of one of the men who was with outstretched hands bending over her. Could he believe his senses? The terror-stricken, willful, unmanageable Susy, whom he would have translated unconsciously to safety without this terrible ordeal of being awakened to the loss of her home and parents at any sacrifice to himself — this ingenuous infant was absolutely throwing herself with every appearance of forgetfulness into the arms of the first newcomer! Yet his perception of this fact was accompanied by no sense of ingratitude. For her sake he felt relieved, and with a boyish smile of satisfaction and encouragement vaulted into the saddle before the stranger.

CHAPTER IV

The dash forward to the train, securely held in the saddle by the arms of their deliverers, was a secret joy to the children that seemed only too quickly over. The resistless gallop of the fiery mustangs, the rush of the night wind, the gathering darkness in which the distant wagons, now halted and facing them, looked like domed huts in the horizon — all these seemed but a delightful and fitting climax to the events of the day. In the sublime forgetfulness of youth, all they had gone through had left no embarrassing record behind it; they were willing to repeat their experiences on the morrow, confident of some equally happy end. And when Clarence, timidly reaching his hand towards the horsehair reins lightly held by his companion, had them playfully yielded up to him by that bold and confident rider, the boy felt himself indeed a man.

But a greater surprise was in store for them. As they neared the wagons, now formed into a circle with a certain degree of military formality, they could see that the appointments of the strange party were larger and more liberal than their own, or indeed anything they had ever known of the kind. Forty or fifty horses were tethered within the circle, and the camp-fires were already blazing. Before one of them a large tent was erected, and through the parted flaps could be seen a table actually spread with a white cloth. Was it a school feast, or was this their ordinary household arrangement? Clarance and Susy thought of their own dinners, usually laid on bare boards

beneath the sky, or under the low hood of the wagon in rainy weather, and marveled. And when they finally halted, and were lifted from their horses, and passed one wagon fitted up as a bedroom and another as a kitchen, they could only nudge each other with silent appreciation. But here again the difference already noted in the quality of the sensations of the two children was observable. Both were equally and agreeably surprised. But Susy's wonder was merely the sense of novelty and inexperience, and a slight disbelief in the actual necessity of what she saw; while Clarence, whether from some previous general experience or peculiar temperament, had the conviction that what he saw here was the usual custom, and what he had known with the Silsbees was the novelty. The feeling was attended with a slight sense of wounded pride for Susy, as if her enthusiasm had exposed her to ridicule.

The man who had carried him, and seemed to be the head of the party, had already preceded them to the tent, and presently reappeared with a lady with whom he had exchanged a dozen hurried words. They seemed to refer to him and Susy; but Clarence was too much preoccupied with the fact that the lady was pretty, that her clothes were neat and thoroughly clean, that her hair was tidy and not rumpled, and that, although she wore an apron, it was as clean as her gown, and even had ribbons on it, to listen to what was said. And when she ran eagerly forward, and with a fascinating smile lifted the astonished Susy in her arms, Clarence, in his delight for his young charge, quite forgot that she had not noticed him. The bearded man, who seemed to be the lady's husband, evidently pointed out the omission, with some additions that Clarence could not catch; for after saying, with a pretty pout, "Well, why should n't he?" she came forward with the same dazzling smile, and laid her small and clean white hand upon his shoulder.

"And so you took good care of the dear little thing? She 's such an angel, is n't she? and you must love her very much."

Clarence colored with delight. It was true it had never occurred to him to look at Susy in the light of a celestial visitant, and I fear he was just then more struck with the fair complimenter than the compliment to his companion, but he was pleased for her sake. He was not yet old enough to be conscious of the sex's belief in its irresistible domination over mankind at all ages, and that Johnny in his check apron would be always a hopeless conquest of Jeannette in her pinafore, and that he ought to have been in love with Susy.

Howbeit, the lady suddenly whisked her away to the recesses of her own wagon, to reappear later, washed, curled, and be-ribboned like a new doll, and Clarence was left alone with the husband and another of the party.

"Well, my boy, you have n't told me your name yet."

"Clarence, sir."

"So Susy calls you, but what else?"

"Clarence Brant."

"Any relation to Colonel Brant?" asked the second man carelessly.

"He was my father," said the boy, brightening under this faint prospect of recognition in his loneliness.

The two men glanced at each other. The leader looked at the boy curiously, and said: —

"Are you the son of Colonel Brant, of Louisville?"

"Yes, sir," said the boy, with a dim stirring of uneasiness in his heart. "But he 's dead now," he added finally.

"Ah, when did he die?" said the man quickly.

"Oh, a long time ago. I don't remember him much. I was very little," said the boy half apologetically.

"Ah, you don't remember him?"

"No," said Clarence shortly. He was beginning to fall

back upon that certain dogged repetition which in sensitive children arises from their hopeless inability to express their deeper feelings. He also had an instinctive consciousness that this want of a knowledge of his father was part of that vague wrong that had been done him. It did not help his uneasiness that he could see that one of the two men, who turned away with a half-laugh, misunderstood or did not believe him.

"How did you come with the Silsbees?" asked the first man.

Clarence repeated mechanically, with a child's distaste of practical details, how he had lived with an aunt at St. Jo, and how his stepmother had procured his passage with the Silsbees to California, where he was to meet his cousin. All this with a lack of interest and abstraction that he was miserably conscious told against him, but he was yet helpless to resist.

The first man remained thoughtful, and then glanced at Clarence's sunburnt hands. Presently his large, good-humored smile returned.

"Well, I suppose you are hungry?"

"Yes," said Clarence shyly. "But" —

"But what?"

"I should like to wash myself a little," he returned hesitatingly, thinking of the clean tent, the clean lady, and Susy's ribbons.

"Certainly," said his friend, with a pleased look. "Come with me." Instead of leading Clarence to the battered tin basin and bar of yellow soap which had formed the toilet service of the Silsbee party, he brought the boy into one of the wagons, where there was a washstand, a china basin, and a cake of scented soap. Standing beside Clarence, he watched him perform his ablutions with an approving air which rather embarrassed his protégé. Presently he said, almost abruptly: —

"Do you remember your father's house at Louisville?"

"Yes, sir; but it was a long time ago."

Clarence remembered it as being very different from his home at St. Joseph's, but from some innate feeling of diffidence he would have shrunk from describing it in that way. He, however, said he thought it was a large house. Yet the modest answer only made his new friend look at him the more keenly.

"Your father was Colonel Hamilton Brant, of Louisville, was n't he?" he said half confidentially.

"Yes," said Clarence hopelessly.

"Well," said his friend cheerfully, as if dismissing an abtruse problem from his mind, "let 's go to supper."

When they reached the tent again, Clarence noticed that the supper was laid only for his host and wife and the second man, — who was familiarly called "Harry," but who spoke of the former always as "Mr. and Mrs. Peyton," — while the remainder of the party, a dozen men, were at a second camp-fire, and evidently enjoying themselves in a picturesque fashion. Had the boy been allowed to choose, he would have joined them, partly because it seemed more "manly," and partly that he dreaded a renewal of the questioning.

But here, Susy, sitting bolt upright on an extemporized high stool, happily diverted his attention by pointing to the empty chair beside her.

"Kla'uns," she said suddenly, with her usual clear and appalling frankness, "they is chickens, and hamanaigs, and hot biksquits, and lasses, and Mister Peyton says I kin have 'em all."

Clarence, who had begun suddenly to feel that he was responsible for Susy's deportment, and was balefully conscious that she was holding her plated fork in her chubby fist by its middle, and, from his previous knowledge of

her, was likely at any moment to plunge it into the dish before her, said softly: —

"Hush!"

"Yes, you shall, dear," said Mrs. Peyton, with tenderly beaming assurance to Susy and a half-reproachful glance at the boy. "Eat what you like, darling."

"It 's a fork," whispered the still uneasy Clarence, as Susy now seemed inclined to stir her bowl of milk with it.

"'T ain't, now, Kla'uns, it 's only a split spoon," said Susy.

But Mrs. Peyton, in her rapt admiration, took small note of these irregularities, plying the child with food, forgetting her own meal, and only stopping at times to lift back the forward straying curls on Susy's shoulders. Mr. Peyton looked on gravely and contentedly. Suddenly the eyes of husband and wife met.

"She 'd have been nearly as old as this, John," said Mrs. Peyton in a faint voice.

John Peyton nodded without speaking, and turned his eyes away into the gathering darkness. The man "Harry" also looked abstractedly at his plate, as if he was saying grace. Clarence wondered who "she" was, and why two little tears dropped from Mrs. Peyton's lashes into Susy's milk, and whether Susy might not violently object to it. He did not know until later that the Peytons had lost their only child, and Susy comfortably drained this mingled cup of a mother's grief and tenderness without suspicion.

"I suppose we 'll come up with their train early to-morrow, if some of them don't find us to-night," said Mrs. Peyton, with a long sigh and a regretful glance at Susy. "Perhaps we might travel together for a little while," she added timidly.

Harry laughed, and Mr. Peyton replied gravely, "I am afraid we would n't travel with them, even for company's sake; and," he added in a lower and graver voice, "it 's

rather odd the search party has n't come upon us yet, though I 'm keeping Pete and Hank patrolling the trail to meet them."

"It 's heartless — so it is!" said Mrs. Peyton, with sudden indignation. "It would be all very well if it was only this boy, who can take care of himself; but to be so careless of a mere baby like this, it 's shameful!"

For the first time, Clarence tasted the cruelty of discrimination. All the more keenly that he was beginning to worship, after his boyish fashion, this sweet-faced, clean, and tender-hearted woman. Perhaps Mr. Peyton noticed it, for he came quietly to his aid.

"Maybe they know better than we in what careful hands they had left her," he said, with a cheerful nod towards Clarence. "And, again, they may have been fooled as we were by Injin signs and left the straight road."

This suggestion instantly recalled to Clarence his vision in the mesquite. Should he dare tell them? Would they believe him, or would they laugh at him before her? He hesitated, and at last resolved to tell it privately to the husband. When the meal was ended, and he was made happy by Mrs. Peyton's laughing acceptance of his offer to help her clear the table and wash the dishes, they all gathered comfortably in front of the tent before the large camp-fire. At the other fire the rest of the party were playing cards and laughing, but Clarence no longer cared to join them. He was quite tranquil in the maternal propinquity of his hostess, albeit a little uneasy as to his reticence about the Indian.

"Kla'uns," said Susy, relieving a momentary pause, in her highest voice, "knows how to speak. Speak, Kla'uns!"

It appearing from Clarence's blushing explanation that this gift was not the ordinary faculty of speech, but a capacity to recite verse, he was politely pressed by the company for a performance.

"Speak 'em, Kla'uns, the boy what stood unto the burnin' deck, and said, 'The boy, oh, where was he?'" said Susy, comfortably lying down on Mrs. Peyton's lap, and contemplating her bare knees in the air. "It's 'bout a boy," she added confidentially to Mrs. Peyton, "whose father would n't never, never stay with him on a burnin' ship, though he said, 'Stay, father, stay,' ever so much."

With this clear, lucid, and perfectly satisfactory explanation of Mrs. Hemans's "Casabianca," Clarence began. Unfortunately, his actual rendering of this popular school performance was more an effort of memory than anything else, and was illustrated by those wooden gestures which a Western schoolmaster had taught him. He described the flames that "roared around him," by indicating with his hand a perfect circle, of which he was the axis; he adjured his father, the late Admiral Casabianca, by clasping his hands before his chin, as if wanting to be manacled in an attitude which he was miserably conscious was unlike anything he himself had ever felt or seen before; he described that father "faint in death below," and "the flag on high," with one single motion. Yet something that the verses had kindled in his active imagination, perhaps, rather than an illustration of the verses themselves, at times brightened his gray eyes, became tremulous in his youthful voice, and, I fear, occasionally incoherent on his lips. At times, when not conscious of his affected art, the plain and all upon it seemed to him to slip away into the night, the blazing camp-fire at his feet to wrap him in a fateful glory, and a vague devotion to something — he knew not what — so possessed him that he communicated it, and probably some of his own youthful delight in extravagant voice, to his hearers, until, when he ceased with a glowing face, he was surprised to find that the card-players had deserted their camp-fires and gathered round the tent.

CHAPTER V

"You didn't say 'Stay, father, stay,' enough, Kla'uns," said Susy critically. Then suddenly starting upright in Mrs. Peyton's lap, she continued rapidly, "I kin dance. And sing. I kin dance High Jambooree."

"What 's High Jambooree, dear?" asked Mrs. Peyton.

"You 'll see. Lemme down." And Susy slipped to the ground.

The dance of High Jambooree, evidently of remote mystical African origin, appeared to consist of three small skips to the right and then to the left, accompanied by the holding up of very short skirts, incessant "teetering" on the toes of small feet, the exhibition of much bare knee and stocking, and a gurgling accompaniment of childish laughter. Vehemently applauded, it left the little performer breathless, but invincible and ready for fresh conquest.

"I kin sing, too," she gasped hurriedly, as if unwilling that the applause should lapse. "I kin sing. Oh, dear! Kla'uns," piteously, "*what* is it I sing?"

"Ben Bolt," suggested Clarence.

"Oh yes. Oh, don't you remember sweet Alers Ben Bolt?" began Susy in the same breath and the wrong key. "Sweet Alers, with hair so brown, who wept with delight when you giv'd her a smile, and" — with knitted brows and appealing recitative, "what 's er rest of it, Kla'uns?"

"Who trembled with fear at your frown?" prompted Clarence.

"Who trembled with fear at my frown?" shrilled Susy "I forget er rest. Wait! I kin sing" —

"Praise God," suggested Clarence.

"Yes." Here Susy, a regular attendant in camp and prayer meetings, was on firmer ground.

Promptly lifting her high treble, yet with a certain acquired deliberation, she began, "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow." At the end of the second line the whispering and laughing ceased. A deep voice to the right, that of the champion poker-player, suddenly rose on the swell of the third line. He was instantly followed by a dozen ringing voices, and by the time the last line was reached it was given with a full chorus, in which the dull chant of teamsters and drivers mingled with the soprano of Mrs. Peyton and Susy's childish treble. Again and again it was repeated, with forgetful eyes and abstracted faces, rising and falling with the night wind and the leap and gleam of the camp-fires, and fading again like them in the immeasurable mystery of the darkened plain.

In the deep and embarrassing silence that followed, at last the party hesitatingly broke up, Mrs. Peyton retiring with Susy after offering the child to Clarence for a perfunctory "good-night" kiss, an unusual proceeding, which somewhat astonished them both — and Clarence found himself near Mr. Peyton.

"I think," said Clarence timidly, "I saw an Injin to-day."

Mr. Peyton bent down towards him. "An Injin — where?" he asked quickly, with the same look of doubting interrogatory with which he had received Clarence's name and parentage.

The boy for a moment regretted having spoken. But with his old doggedness he particularized his statement. Fortunately, being gifted with a keen perception, he was able to describe the stranger accurately, and to impart with his description that contempt for its subject which he had felt, and which to his frontier auditor established

its truthfulness. Peyton turned abruptly away, but presently returned with Harry and another man.

"You are sure of this?" said Peyton half encouragingly.

"Yes, sir."

"As sure as you are that your father is Colonel Brant and is dead?" said Harry, with a light laugh.

Tears sprang into the boy's lowering eyes. "I don't lie," he said doggedly.

"I believe you, Clarence," said Peyton quietly. "But why did n't you say it before?"

"I did n't like to say it before Susy and — her!" stammered the boy.

"Her?"

"Yes, sir, — Mrs. Peyton," said Clarence blushingly.

"Oh," said Harry sarcastically, "how blessed polite we are!"

"That 'll do. Let up on him, will you?" said Peyton, roughly, to his subordinate. "The boy knows what he 's about. But," he continued, addressing Clarence, "how was it the Injin did n't see you?"

"I was very still on account of not waking Susy," said Clarence, "and" — He hesitated.

"And what?"

"He seemed more keen watching what *you* were doing," said the boy boldly.

"That 's so," broke in the second man, who happened to be experienced, "and as he was to wind'ard o' the boy he was off *his* scent and bearings. He was one of their rear scouts; the rest o' them 's ahead crossing our track to cut us off. Ye did n't see anything else?"

"I saw a coyote first," said Clarence, greatly encouraged.

"Hold on!" said the expert, as Harry turned away with a sneer. "That 's a sign, too. Wolf don't go where wolf hez been, and coyote don't foller Injins — there 's no pickin's! How long afore did you see the coyote?"

"Just after we left the wagon," said Clarence.

"That 's it," said the man thoughtfully. "He was driven on ahead, or hanging on their flanks. These Injins are betwixt us and that ar train, or following it."

Peyton made a hurried gesture of warning, as if reminding the speaker of Clarence's presence — a gesture which the boy noticed and wondered at. Then the conversation of the three men took a lower tone, although Clarence distinctly heard the concluding opinion of the expert.

"It ain't no good now, Mr. Peyton, and you 'd be only exposing yourself on their ground by breakin' camp agin to-night. And you don't know that it ain't *us* they 're watchin'. You see, if we had n't turned off the straight road when we got that first scare from these yer lost children, we might hev gone on and walked plump into some cursed trap of those devils. To my mind, we 're just in nigger luck, and with a good watch and my patrol we 're all right to be fixed where we be till daylight."

Mr. Peyton presently turned away, taking Clarence with him. "As we 'll be up early and on the track of your train to-morrow, my boy, you had better turn in now. I 've put you up in my wagon, and as I expect to be in the saddle most of the night, I reckon I won't trouble you much." He led the way to a second wagon — drawn up beside the one where Susy and Mrs. Peyton had retired — which Clarence was surprised to find fitted with a writing-table and desk, a chair, and even a bookshelf containing some volumes. A long locker, fitted like a lounge, had been made up as a couch for him, with the unwonted luxury of clean white sheets and pillow-cases. A soft matting covered the floor of the heavy wagon bed, which, Mr. Peyton explained, was hung on centre springs to prevent jarring. The sides and roof of the vehicle were of lightly paneled wood, instead of the usual hooked canvas frame of the ordinary emigrant wagon, and fitted with a glazed

door and movable window for light and air. Clarence wondered why the big, powerful man, who seemed at home on horseback, should ever care to sit in this office like a merchant or a lawyer; and if this train sold things to the other trains, or took goods, like the peddlers, to towns on the route; but there seemed to be nothing to sell, and the other wagons were filled with only the goods required by the party. He would have liked to ask Mr. Peyton who *he* was, and have questioned *him* as freely as he himself had been questioned. But as the average adult man never takes into consideration the injustice of denying to the natural and even necessary curiosity of childhood that questioning which he himself is so apt to assume without right, and almost always without delicacy, Clarence had no recourse. Yet the boy, like all children, was conscious that if he had been afterwards questioned about *this* inexplicable experience, he would have been blamed for his ignorance concerning it. Left to himself presently, and ensconced between the sheets, he lay for some moments staring about him. The unwonted comfort of his couch, so different from the stuffy blanket in the hard wagon bed which he had shared with one of the teamsters, and the novelty, order, and cleanliness of his surroundings, while they were grateful to his instincts, began in some vague way to depress him. To his loyal nature it seemed a tacit infidelity to his former rough companions to be lying here; he had a dim idea that he had lost that independence which equal discomfort and equal pleasure among them had given him. There seemed a sense of servitude in accepting this luxury which was not his. This set him endeavoring to remember something of his father's house, of the large rooms, drafty staircases, and far-off ceilings, and the cold formality of a life that seemed made up of strange faces; some stranger — his parents; some kinder — the servants; particularly the black nurse who had him in

charge. Why did Mr. Peyton ask him about it? Why, if it were so important to strangers, had not his mother told him more of it? And why was she not like this good woman with the gentle voice who was so kind to — to Susy? And what did they mean by making *him* so miserable? Something rose in his throat, but with an effort he choked it back, and, creeping from the lounge, went softly to the window, opened it to see if it "would work," and looked out. The shrouded camp-fires, the stars that glittered but gave no light, the dim moving bulk of a patrol beyond the circle, all seemed to intensify the darkness, and changed the current of his thoughts. He remembered what Mr. Peyton had said of him, when they first met. "Suthin' of a pup, ain't he?" Surely that meant something that was not bad! He crept back to the couch again.

Lying there, still awake, he reflected that he would n't be a scout when he grew up, but would be something like Mr. Peyton, and have a train like this, and invite the Silsbees and Susy to accompany him. For this purpose, he and Susy, early to-morrow morning, would get permission to come in here and play at that game. This would familiarize him with the details, so that he would be able at any time to take charge of it. He was already an authority on the subject of Indians! He had once been fired at — as an Indian. He would always carry a rifle like that hanging from the hooks at the end of the wagon before him, and would eventually slay many Indians and keep an account of them in a big book like that on the desk. Susy would help him, having grown up a lady, and they would both together issue provisions and rations from the door of the wagon to the gathered crowds. He would be known as the "White Chief," his Indian name being "Suthin' of a Pup." He would have a circus van attached to the train, in which he would occasionally per-

form. He would also have artillery for protection. There would be a terrific engagement, and he would rush into the wagon, heated and blackened with gunpowder; and Susy would put down an account of it in a book, and Mrs. Peyton — for she would be there in some vague capacity — would say, "Really, now, I don't see but what we were very lucky in having such a boy as Clarence with us. I begin to understand him better." And Harry, who, for purposes of vague poetical retaliation, would also drop in at that moment, would mutter and say, "He is certainly the son of Colonel Brant; dear me!" and apologize. And his mother would come in also, in her coldest and most indifferent manner, in a white ball-dress, and start and say, "Good gracious, how that boy has grown! I am sorry I did not see more of him when he was young." Yet even in the midst of this came a confusing numbness, and then the side of the wagon seemed to melt away, and he drifted out again alone into the empty desolate plain from which even the sleeping Susy had vanished, and he was left deserted and forgotten. Then all was quiet in the wagon, and only the night wind moving round it. But lo! the lashes of the sleeping White Chief — the dauntless leader, the ruthless destroyer of Indians — were wet with glittering tears!

Yet it seemed only a moment afterwards that he awoke with a faint consciousness of some arrested motion. To his utter consternation, the sun, three hours high, was shining in the wagon, already hot and stifling in its beams. There was the familiar smell and taste of the dirty road in the air about him. There was a faint creaking of boards and springs, a slight oscillation, and beyond the audible rattle of harness, as if the train had been under way, the wagon moving, and then there had been a sudden halt. They had probably come up with the Silsbee train; in a few moments the change would be effected and all of his

strange experience would be over. He must get up now. Yet, with the morning laziness of the healthy young animal, he curled up a moment longer in his luxurious couch.

How quiet it was! There were far-off voices, but they seemed suppressed and hurried. Through the window he saw one of the teamsters run rapidly past him with a strange, breathless, preoccupied face, halt a moment at one of the following wagons, and then run back again to the front. Then two of the voices came nearer, with the dull beating of hoofs in the dust.

"Rout out the boy and ask him," said a half-suppressed, impatient voice, which Clarence at once recognized as the man Harry's.

"Hold on till Peyton comes up," said the second voice in a low tone; "leave it to him."

"Better find out what they were like, at once," grumbled Harry.

"Wait, stand back," said Peyton's voice, joining the others; "*I'll* ask him."

Clarence looked wonderingly at the door. It opened on Mr. Peyton, dusty and dismounted, with a strange, abstracted look in his face.

"How many wagons are in your train, Clarence?"

"Three, sir."

"Any marks on them?"

"Yes, sir," said Clarence eagerly: "'Off to California' and 'Root, Hog, or Die.'"

Mr. Peyton's eye seemed to leap up and hold Clarence's with a sudden, strange significance, and then looked down.

"How many were you in all?" he continued.

"Five, and there was Mrs. Silsbee."

"No other woman?"

"No."

"Get up and dress yourself," he said gravely, "and

wait here till I come back. Keep cool and have your wits about you." He dropped his voice slightly. "Perhaps something 's happened that you 'll have to show yourself a little man again for, Clarence!"

The door closed, and the boy heard the same muffled hoofs and voices die away towards the front. He began to dress himself mechanically, almost vacantly, yet conscious always of a vague undercurrent of thrilling excitement. When he had finished he waited almost breathlessly, feeling the same beating of his heart that he had felt when he was following the vanished train the day before. At last he could stand the suspense no longer, and opened the door. Everything was still in the motionless caravan, except — it struck him oddly even then — the unconcerned prattling voice of Susy from one of the nearer wagons. Perhaps a sudden feeling that this was something that concerned *her*, perhaps an irresistible impulse, overcame him, but the next moment he had leaped to the ground, faced about, and was running feverishly to the front.

The first thing that met his eyes was the helpless and desolate bulk of one of the Silsbee wagons a hundred rods away, bereft of oxen and pole, standing alone and motionless against the dazzling sky! Near it was the broken frame of another wagon, its fore wheels and axles gone, pitched forward on its knees like an ox under the butcher's sledge. Not far away there were the burnt and blackened ruins of a third, around which the whole party on foot and horseback seemed to be gathered. As the boy ran violently on, the group opened to make way for two men carrying some helpless but awful object between them. A terrible instinct made Clarence swerve from it in his headlong course, but he was at the same moment discovered by the others, and a cry arose of "Go back!" "Stop!" "Keep him back!" Heeding it no more than

the wind that whistled by him, Clarence made directly for the foremost wagon — the one in which he and Susy had played. A powerful hand caught his shoulder; it was Mr. Peyton's.

"Mrs. Silsbee's wagon," said the boy, with white lips, pointing to it. "Where is she?"

"She 's missing," said Peyton, "and one other — the rest are dead."

"She must be there," said the boy, struggling, and pointing to the wagon; "let me go."

"Clarence," said Peyton sternly, accenting his grasp upon the boy's arm, "be a man! Look around you. Try and tell us who these are."

There seemed to be one or two heaps of old clothes lying on the ground, and further on, where the men at a command from Peyton had laid down their burden, another. In those ragged, dusty heaps of clothes, from which all the majesty of life seemed to have been ruthlessly stamped out, only what was ignoble and grotesque appeared to be left. There was nothing terrible in this. The boy moved slowly towards them; and, incredible even to himself, the overpowering fear of them that a moment before had overcome him left him as suddenly. He walked from the one to the other, recognizing them by certain marks and signs, and mentioning name after name. The groups gazed at him curiously; he was conscious that he scarcely understood himself, still less the same quiet purpose that now made him turn towards the furthest wagon.

"There 's nothing there," said Peyton; "we 've searched it." But the boy, without replying, continued his way, and the crowd followed him.

The deserted wagon, more rude, disorderly, and slovenly than it had ever seemed to him before, was now heaped and tumbled with broken bones, cans, scattered provisions, pots, pans, blankets, and clothing in the foul confusion of

a dust-heap. But in this heterogeneous mingling the boy's quick eye caught sight of a draggled edge of calico.

"That 's Mrs. Silsbee's dress!" he cried, and leaped into the wagon.

At first the men stared at each other, but an instant later a dozen hands were helping him, nervously digging and clearing away the rubbish. Then one man uttered a sudden cry, and fell back with frantic but furious eyes uplifted against the pitiless, smiling sky above him.

"Great God! look here!"

It was the yellowish, waxen face of Mrs. Silsbee that had been uncovered. But to the fancy of the boy it had changed; the old familiar lines of worry, care, and querulousness had given way to a look of remote peace and statue-like repose. He had often vexed her in her aggressive life; he was touched with remorse at her cold, passionless apathy now, and pressed timidly forward. Even as he did so, the man, with a quick but warning gesture, hurriedly threw his handkerchief over the matted locks, as if to shut out something awful from his view. Clarence felt himself drawn back; but not before the white lips of a bystander had whispered a single word —

"Scalped, too! by God!"

CHAPTER VI

THEN followed days and weeks that seemed to Clarence as a dream. At first, an interval of hushed and awed restraint, when he and Susy were kept apart, a strange and artificial interest taken little note of by him, but afterwards remembered when others had forgotten it; the burial of Mrs. Silsbee beneath a cairn of stones, with some ceremonies that, simple though they were, seemed to usurp the sacred rights of grief from him and Susy, and leave them cold and frightened; days of frequent and incoherent childish outbursts from Susy, growing fainter and rarer as time went on, until they ceased, he knew not when; the haunting by night of that morning vision of the three or four heaps of ragged clothes upon the ground, and a half regret that he had not examined them more closely; a recollection of the awful loneliness and desolation of the broken and abandoned wagon left behind on its knees, as if praying mutely when the train went on and left it; the trundling behind of the fateful wagon in which Mrs. Silsbee's body had been found, superstitiously shunned by every one, and when at last turned over to the authorities at an outpost garrison, seeming to drop the last link from the dragging chain of the past. The revelation to the children of a new experience in that brief glimpse of the frontier garrison; the handsome officer in uniform and belted sword, an heroic, vengeful figure to be admired and imitated hereafter; the sudden importance and respect given to Susy and himself as "survivors;" the sympathetic questioning and kindly exaggerations of their experiences, quickly

accepted by Susy — all these, looking back upon them afterwards, seemed to have passed in a dream.

No less strange and visionary to them seemed the real transitions they noted from the moving train. How one morning they missed the changeless, motionless, low, dark line along the horizon, and before noon found themselves among rocks and trees and a swiftly rushing river. How there suddenly appeared beside them a few days later a great gray cloud-covered ridge of mountains that they were convinced was that same dark line that they had seen so often. How the men laughed at them, and said that for the last three days they had been *crossing* that dark line, and that it was *higher* than the great gray-clouded range before them, which it had always hidden from their view! How Susy firmly believed that these changes took place in her sleep, when she always "kinder felt they were crawlin' up," and how Clarence, in the happy depreciation of extreme youth, expressed his conviction that they "were n't a bit high, after all." How the weather became cold, though it was already summer, and at night the camp-fire was a necessity, and there was a stove in the tent with Susy; and yet how all this faded away, and they were again upon a dazzling, burnt, and sun-dried plain! But always as in a dream!

More real were the persons who composed the party — whom they seemed to have always known — and who, in the innocent caprice of children, had become to them more actual than the dead had ever been. There was Mr. Peyton, who they now knew owned the train, and who was so rich that he "need n't go to California if he did n't want to, and was going to buy a great deal of it if he liked it," and who was also a lawyer and "policeman" — which was Susy's rendering of "politician" — and was called "Squire" and "Judge" at the frontier outpost, and could order anybody to be "took up if he wanted to," and who

knew everybody by their Christian names; and Mrs. Peyton, who had been delicate, and was ordered by the doctor to live in the open air for six months, and "never go into a house or a town again," and who was going to adopt Susy as soon as her husband could arrange with Susy's relatives, and draw up the papers! How "Harry" was Henry Benham, Mrs. Peyton's brother, and a kind of partner of Mr. Peyton. And how the scout's name was Gus Gildersleeve, or the "White Crow," and how, through his recognized intrepidity, an attack upon their train was no doubt averted. Then there was "Bill," the stock herder, and "Texas Jim," the vaquero — the latter marvelous and unprecedented in horsemanship. Such were their companions, as appeared through the gossip of the train and their own inexperienced consciousness. To them, they were all astounding and important personages. But, either from boyish curiosity or some sense of being misunderstood, Clarence was more attracted by the two individuals of the party who were least kind to him — namely, Mrs. Peyton and her brother Harry. I fear that, after the fashion of most children, and some grown-up people, he thought less of the steady kindness of Mr. Peyton and the others than of the rare tolerance of Harry or the polite concessions of his sister. Miserably conscious of this at times, he quite convinced himself that if he could only win a word of approbation from Harry, or a smile from Mrs. Peyton, he would afterwards revenge himself by "running away." Whether he would or not, I cannot say. I am writing of a foolish, growing, impressionable boy of eleven, of whose sentiments nothing could be safely predicted but uncertainty.

It was at this time that he became fascinated by another member of the party, whose position had been too humble and unimportant to be included in the group already noted. Of the same appearance as the other teamsters in

size, habits, and apparel, he had not at first exhibited to Clarence any claim to sympathy. But it appeared that he was actually a youth of only sixteen — a hopeless incorrigible of St. Joseph, whose parents had prevailed on Peyton to allow him to join the party, by way of removing him from evil associations and as a method of reform. Of this Clarence was at first ignorant, not from any want of frankness on the part of the youth, for that ingenuous young gentleman later informed him that he had killed three men in St. Louis, two in St. Jo, and that the officers of justice were after him. But it was evident that to precocious habits of drinking, smoking, chewing, and card-playing, this overgrown youth added a strong tendency to exaggeration of statement. Indeed, he was known as "Lying Jim Hooker," and his various qualities presented a problem to Clarence that was attractive and inspiring, doubtful, but always fascinating. With the hoarse voice of early wickedness and a contempt for ordinary courtesy, he had a round, perfectly good-humored face, and a disposition that, when not called upon to act up to his self-imposed rôle of reckless wickedness, was not unkindly.

It was only a few days after the massacre, and while the children were still wrapped in the gloomy interest and frightened reticence which followed it, that "Jim Hooker" first characteristically flashed upon Clarence's perceptions. Hanging half on and half off the saddle of an Indian pony, the lank Jim suddenly made his appearance, dashing violently up and down the track, and around the wagon in which Clarence was sitting, tugging desperately at the reins, with every indication of being furiously run away with, and retaining his seat only with the most dauntless courage and skill. Round and round they went, the helpless rider at times hanging by a single stirrup near the ground, and again recovering himself by — as it seemed to Clarence — almost superhuman effort. Clarence sat open-

mouthed with anxiety and excitement, and yet a few of the other teamsters laughed. Then the voice of Mr. Peyton, from the window of his car, said quietly: —

"There, that will do, Jim. Quit it!"

The furious horse and rider instantly disappeared. A few moments after, the bewildered Clarence saw the redoubted horseman trotting along quietly in the dust of the rear, on the same fiery steed, who in that prosaic light bore an astounding resemblance to an ordinary team horse. Later in the day he sought an explanation from the rider.

"You see," answered Jim gloomily, "thar ain't a galoot in this yer crowd ez knows jist *what's* in that hoss! And them ez suspecks dare n't say! It would n't do for to hev it let out that the Judge hez a Morgan-Mexican plug that 's killed two men afore he got him, and is bound to kill another afore he gets through! Why, on'y the week afore we kem up to you, that thar hoss bolted with me at camping! Bucked and throwed me, but I kept my holt o' the stirrups with my foot — so! Dragged me a matter of two miles, head down, and me keepin' away rocks with my hand — so!"

"Why did n't you loose your foot and let go?" asked Clarence breathlessly.

"*You* might," said Jim, with deep scorn; "that ain't *my* style. I just laid low till we kem to a steep pitched hill, and goin' down when the hoss was, so to speak, kinder *below* me, I just turned a handspring, so, and that landed me onter his back again."

This action, though vividly illustrated by Jim's throwing his hands down like feet beneath him, and indicating the parabola of a spring in the air, proving altogether too much for Clarence's mind to grasp, he timidly turned to a less difficult detail.

"What made the horse bolt first, Mr. Hooker?"

"Smelt Injins!" said Jim, carelessly expectorating to-

bacco juice in a curving jet from the side of his mouth — a singularly fascinating accomplishment, peculiarly his own, "'n' likely *your* Injins."

"But," argued Clarence hesitatingly, "you said it was a week before — and" —

"Er Mexican plug kin smell Injins fifty, yes, a hundred miles away," said Jim, with scornful deliberation; "'n' if Judge Peyton had took my advice, and hadn't been so mighty 'feard about the character of his hoss gettin' out, he 'd hev played roots on them Injins afore they tetched ye. But," he added, with gloomy dejection, "there ain't no sand in this yer crowd, thar ain't no vim, thar ain't nothin'; and thar can't be ez long ez thar 's women and babies, and women and baby fixin's, mixed up with it. I 'd hev cut the whole blamed gang ef it were n't for one or two things," he added darkly.

Clarence, impressed by Jim's mysterious manner, for the moment forgot his contemptuous allusion to Mr. Peyton, and the evident implication of Susy and himself, and asked hurriedly, "What things?"

Jim, as if forgetful of the boy's presence in his fitful mood, abstractedly half drew a glittering bowie-knife from his boot leg, and then slowly put it back again. "Thar 's one or two old scores," he continued in a low voice, although no one was in hearing distance of them, "one or two private accounts," he went on tragically, averting his eyes as if watched by some one, "thet hev to be wiped out with blood afore *I* leave. Thar 's one or two men *too many* alive and breathin' in this yer crowd. Mebbe it 's Gus Gildersleeve; mebbe it 's Harry Benham; mebbe," he added, with dark yet noble disinterestedness, "it 's *me.*"

"Oh no," said Clarence, with polite deprecation.

Far from placating the gloomy Jim, this seemed only to awake his suspicions. "Mebbe," he said, dancing sud-

denly away from Clarence, "mebbe you think I 'm lyin'. Mebbe you think, because you 're Colonel Brant's son, yer kin run *me* with this yer train. Mebbe," he continued, dancing violently back again, "ye kalkilate, because ye run off 'n' stampeded a baby, ye kin tote me round too, sonny. Mebbe," he went on, executing a double-shuffle in the dust, and alternately striking his hands on the sides of his boots, "mebbe you 're spyin' round and reportin' to the Judge."

Firmly convinced that Jim was working himself up by an Indian war-dance to some desperate assault on himself, but resenting the last unjust accusation, Clarence had recourse to one of his old dogged silences. Happily at this moment an authoritative voice called out, "Now, then, you Jim Hooker!" and the desperate Hooker, as usual, vanished instantly. Nevertheless, he appeared an hour or two later beside the wagon in which Susy and Clarence were seated, with an expression of satiated vengeance and remorseful bloodguiltiness in his face, and his hair combed Indian fashion over his eyes. As he generously contented himself with only passing a gloomy and disparaging criticism on the game of cards that the children were playing, it struck Clarence for the first time that a great deal of his real wickedness resided in his hair. This set him to thinking that it was strange that Mr. Peyton did not try to reform him with a pair of scissors, but not until Clarence himself had for at least four days attempted to imitate Jim by combing his own hair in that fashion.

A few days later, Jim again casually favored him with a confidential interview. Clarence had been allowed to bestride one of the team leaders postilionwise, and was correspondingly elevated, when Jim joined him, on the Mexican plug, which appeared — no doubt a part of its wicked art — heavily docile, and even slightly lame.

"How much," said Jim in a tone of gloomy confidence,

"how much did you reckon to make by stealin' that gal-baby, sonny?"

"Nothing," replied Clarence, with a smile. Perhaps it was an evidence of the marked influence that Jim was beginning to exert over him that he already did not attempt to resent this fascinating implication of grown-up guilt.

"It orter bin a good job, if it warn't revenge," continued Jim moodily.

"No, it was n't revenge," said Clarence hurriedly.

"Then ye kalkilated ter get er hundred dollars reward ef the old man and old woman had n't bin scelped afore ye got up to 'em?" said Jim. "That 's your blamed dodgasted luck, eh! Enyhow, you 'll make Mrs. Peyton plank down suthin' if she adopts the babby. Look yer, young feller," he said, starting suddenly and throwing his face forward, glaring fiendishly through his matted side-locks, "d' ye mean ter tell me it was n't a plant — a skin game — the hull thing?"

"A what?" said Clarence.

"D' ye mean to say" — it was wonderful how gratuitously husky his voice became at this moment — "d' ye mean ter tell *me* ye did n't set on them Injins to wipe out the Silsbees, so that ye could hev an out-an'-out gal *orfen* on hand fer Mrs. Peyton ter adopt — eh?"

But here Clarence was forced to protest, and strongly, although Jim contemptuously ignored it. "Don't lie ter me," he repeated mysteriously, "I 'm fly. I 'm dark, young fel. We 're cahoots in this thing!" And with this artful suggestion of being in possession of Clarence's guilty secret, he departed in time to elude the usual objurgation of his superior, "Phil," the head teamster.

Nor was his baleful fascination exercised entirely on Clarence. In spite of Mrs. Peyton's jealously affectionate care, Clarence's frequent companionship, and the little circle of admiring courtiers that always surrounded Susy,

it became evident that this small Eve had been secretly approached and tempted by the Satanic Jim. She was found one day to have a few heron's feathers in her possession with which she adorned her curls, and at another time was discovered to have rubbed her face and arms with yellow and red ochre, confessedly the free gift of Jim Hooker. It was to Clarence alone that she admitted the significance and purport of these offerings. "Jim giv'd 'em to me," she said, "and Jim 's a kind of Injin hisself that won't hurt me; and when bad Injins come, they 'll think I 'm his Injin baby and run away. And Jim said if I 'd just told the Injins, when they came to kill papa and mamma, that I b'longed to him, they 'd hev runned away."

"But," said the practical Clarence, "you could not; you know you were with Mrs. Peyton all the time."

"Kla'uns," said Susy, shaking her head and fixing her round blue eyes with calm mendacity on the boy, "don't you tell me. *I was there!*"

Clarence started back, and nearly fell over the wagon in hopeless dismay at the dreadful revelation of Susy's powers of exaggeration. "But," he gasped, "you know, Susy, you and me left before" —

"Kla'uns," said Susy calmly, making a little pleat in the skirt of her dress with her small thumb and fingers, "don't you talk to me. I was there. I 'se a *seriver!* The men at the fort said so! The *serivers* is allus, allus there, and allus, allus knows everythin'."

Clarence was too dumfounded to reply. He had a vague recollection of having noticed before that Susy was very much fascinated by the reputation given to her at Fort Ridge as a "survivor," and was trying in an infantile way to live up to it. This the wicked Jim had evidently encouraged. For a day or two Clarence felt a little afraid of her, and more lonely than ever.

It was in this state, and while he was doggedly conscious that his association with Jim did not prepossess Mrs. Peyton or her brother in his favor, and that the former even believed him responsible for Susy's unhallowed acquaintance with Jim, that he drifted into one of those youthful escapades on which elders are apt to sit in severe but not always considerate judgment. Believing, like many other children, that nobody cared particularly for him, except to *restrain* him, discovering, as children do, much sooner than we complacently imagine, that love and preference have no logical connection with desert or character, Clarence became boyishly reckless. But when, one day, it was rumored that a herd of buffalo was in the vicinity, and that the train would be delayed the next morning in order that a hunt might be organized by Gildersleeve, Benham, and a few others, Clarence listened willingly to Jim's proposition that they should secretly follow it.

To effect their unhallowed purpose required boldness and duplicity. It was arranged that shortly after the departure of the hunting party Clarence should ask permission to mount and exercise one of the team horses — a favor that had been frequently granted him; that in the outskirts of the camp he should pretend that the horse ran away with him, and Jim would start in pursuit. The absence of the shooting party with so large a contingent of horses and men would preclude any further detachment from the camp to assist them. Once clear, they would follow the track of the hunters, and, if discovered by them, would offer the same excuse, with the addition that they had lost their way to the camp. The plan was successful. The details were carried out with almost too perfect effect; as it appeared that Jim, in order to give dramatic intensity to the fractiousness of Clarence's horse, had inserted a thorn-apple under the neck of his saddle, which Clarence only discovered in time to prevent himself

from being unseated. Urged forward by ostentatious "Whoas!" and surreptitious cuts in the rear from Jim, pursuer and pursued presently found themselves safely beyond the half-dry stream and fringe of alder bushes that skirted the camp. They were not followed. Whether the teamsters suspected and winked at this design, or believed that the boys could take care of themselves, and ran no risk of being lost in the proximity of the hunting party, there was no general alarm.

Thus reassured, and having a general idea of the direction of the hunt, the boys pushed hilariously forward. Before them opened a vast expanse of bottom land, slightly sloping on the right to a distant half-filled lagoon, formed by the main river overflow, on whose tributary they had encamped. The lagoon was partly hidden by straggling timber and "brush," and beyond that, again, stretched the unlimitable plains — the pasture of their mighty game. Hither, Jim hoarsely informed his companion, the buffaloes came to water. A few rods further on, he started dramatically, and, alighting, proceeded to slowly examine the ground. It seemed to be scattered over with half-circular patches, which he pointed out mysteriously as "buffalo chip." To Clarence's inexperienced perception the plain bore a singular resemblance to the surface of an ordinary unromantic cattle pasture that somewhat chilled his heroic fancy. However, the two companions halted and professionally examined their arms and equipments.

These, I grieve to say, though varied, were scarcely full or satisfactory. The necessities of their flight had restricted Jim to an old double-barreled fowling-piece, which he usually carried slung across his shoulders; an old-fashioned "six-shooter," whose barrels revolved occasionally and unexpectedly, known as "Allen's Pepper Box" on account of its culinary resemblance; and a bowie-knife. Clarence carried an Indian bow and arrow with which he

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had been exercising, and a hatchet which he had concealed under the flanks of his saddle. To this Jim generously added the six-shooter, taking the hatchet in exchange — a transfer that at first delighted Clarence, until, seeing the warlike and picturesque effect of the hatchet in Jim's belt, he regretted the transfer. The gun, Jim meantime explained, "extry charged," "chuck up" to the middle with slugs and revolver bullets, could only be fired by himself, and even then, he darkly added, not without danger. This poverty of equipment was, however, compensated by opposite statements from Jim of the extraordinary results obtained by these simple weapons from "fellers I knew:" how *he* himself had once brought down a "bull" by a bold shot with a revolver through its open bellowing mouth that pierced its "innards;" how a friend of his — an intimate in fact — now in jail at Louisville for killing a sheriff's deputy, had once found himself alone and dismounted with a simple clasp-knife and a lariat among a herd of buffaloes; how, leaping calmly upon the shaggy shoulders of the biggest bull, he lashed himself with the lariat firmly to its horns, goading it onward with his clasp-knife, and subsisting for days upon the flesh cut from its living body, until, abandoned by its fellows, and exhausted by loss of blood, it finally succumbed to its victor at the very outskirts of the camp to which he had artfully driven it! It must be confessed that this recital somewhat took away Clarence's breath, and he would have liked to ask a few questions. But they were alone on the prairie, and linked by a common transgression; the glorious sun was coming up victoriously, the pure, crisp air was intoxicating their nerves; in the bright forecast of youth everything *was* possible!

The surface of the bottom land that they were crossing was here and there broken up by fissures and "pot-holes," and some circumspection in their progress became neces-

sary. In one of these halts, Clarence was struck by a dull, monotonous jarring that sounded like the heavy, regular fall of water over a dam. Each time that they slackened their pace the sound would become more audible, and was at last accompanied by that slight but unmistakable tremor of the earth that betrayed the vicinity of a waterfall. Hesitating over this phenomenon, which seemed to imply that their topography was wrong and that they had blundered from the track, they were presently startled by the fact that the sound was actually *approaching* them! With a sudden instinct they both galloped towards the lagoon. As the timber opened before them Jim uttered a long ecstatic shout: "Why, it 's *them!*"

At a first glance it seemed to Clarence as if the whole plain beyond was broken up and rolling in tumbling waves or furrows towards them. A second glance showed the tossing fronts of a vast herd of buffaloes, and here and there, darting in and out and among them, or emerging from the cloud of dust behind, wild figures and flashes of fire. With the idea of water still in his mind, it seemed as if some tumultuous tidal wave were sweeping unseen towards the lagoon, carrying everything before it. He turned with eager eyes, in speechless expectancy, to his companion.

Alack! that redoubtable hero and mighty hunter was, to all appearances, equally speechless and astonished. It was true that he remained rooted to the saddle, a lank, still heroic figure, alternately grasping his hatchet and gun with a kind of spasmodic regularity. How long he would have continued this could never be known, for the next moment, with a deafening crash, the herd broke through the brush, and, swerving at the right of the lagoon, bore down directly upon them. All further doubt or hesitation on their part was stopped. The far-seeing, sagacious Mexican plug with a terrific snort wheeled and fled furiously with his rider.

Moved, no doubt, by touching fidelity, Clarence's humbler team-horse instantly followed. In a few moments those devoted animals struggled neck to neck in noble emulation.

"What are we goin' off this way for?" gasped the simple Clarence.

"Peyton and Gildersleeve are back there — and they 'll see us," gasped Jim in reply. It struck Clarence that the buffaloes were much nearer them than the hunting party, and that the trampling hoofs of a dozen bulls were close behind them, but with another gasp he shouted: —

"When are we going to hunt 'em?"

"Hunt *them!*" screamed Jim, with a hysterical outburst of truth; "why, they 're huntin' *us* — dash it!"

Indeed, there was no doubt that their frenzied horses were flying before the equally frenzied herd behind them. They gained a momentary advantage by riding into one of the fissures, and out again on the other side, while their pursuers were obliged to make a détour. But in a few minutes they were overtaken by that part of the herd who had taken the other and nearer side of the lagoon, and were now fairly in the midst of them. The ground shook with their trampling hoofs; their steaming breath, mingling with the stinging dust that filled the air, half choked and blinded Clarence. He was dimly conscious that Jim had wildly thrown his hatchet at a cow-buffalo pressing close upon his flanks. As they swept down into another gully he saw him raise his fateful gun in utter desperation. Clarence crouched low on his horse's outstretched neck. There was a blinding flash, a single stunning report from both barrels; Jim reeled in one way half out of the saddle, while the smoking gun seemed to leap in another over his head, and then rider and horse vanished in a choking cloud of dust and gunpowder. A moment after Clarence's horse stopped with a sudden check, and the boy felt himself hurled over its head into the gully, alighting on some-

thing that seemed to be a bounding cushion of curled and twisted hair. It was the shaggy shoulder of an enormous buffalo! For Jim's desperate random shot and double charge had taken effect on the near hind leg of a preceding bull, tearing away the flesh and ham-stringing the animal, who had dropped in the gully just in front of Clarence's horse.

Dazed but unhurt, the boy rolled from the lifted fore quarters of the struggling brute to the ground. When he staggered to his feet again, not only his horse was gone, but the whole herd of buffaloes seemed to have passed too, and he could hear the shouts of unseen hunters now ahead of him. They had evidently overlooked his fall, and the gully had concealed him. The sides before him were too steep for his aching limbs to climb; the slope by which he and the bull had descended when the collision occurred was behind the wounded animal. Clarence was staggering towards it when the bull, by a supreme effort, lifted itself on three legs, half turned, and faced him.

These events had passed too quickly for the inexperienced boy to have felt any active fear, or indeed anything but wild excitement and confusion. But the spectacle of that shaggy and enormous front, that seemed to fill the whole gully, rising with awful deliberation between him and escape, sent a thrill of terror through his frame. The great, dull, bloodshot eyes glared at him with a dumb, wondering fury; the large wet nostrils were so near that their first snort of inarticulate rage made him reel backwards as from a blow. The gully was only a narrow and short fissure or subsidence of the plain; a few paces more of retreat and he would be at its end, against an almost perpendicular bank fifteen feet high. If he attempted to climb its crumbling sides and fell, there would be those short but terrible horns waiting to impale him! It seemed too terrible, too cruel! He was so small beside this over-

grown monster. It was n't fair! The tears started to his eyes, and then, in a rage at the injustice of Fate, he stood doggedly still with clenched fists. He fixed his gaze with half-hysterical, childish fury on those lurid eyes; he did not know that, owing to the strange magnifying power of the bull's convex pupils, he, Clarence, appeared much bigger than he really was to the brute's heavy consciousness, the distance from him most deceptive, and that it was to this fact that hunters so often owed their escape. He only thought of some desperate means of attack. Ah! the six-shooter. It was still in his pocket. He drew it nervously, hopelessly — it looked so small compared with his large enemy!

He presented it with flashing eyes, and pulled the trigger. A feeble click followed, another, and again! Even *this* had mocked him. He pulled the trigger once more, wildly; there was a sudden explosion, and another. He stepped back; the balls had apparently flattened themselves harmlessly on the bull's forehead. He pulled again, hopelessly; there was another report, a sudden furious bellow, and the enormous brute threw his head savagely to one side, burying his left horn deep in the crumbling bank beside him. Again and again he charged the bank, driving his left horn home, and bringing down the stones and earth in showers. It was some seconds before Clarence saw in a single glimpse of that wildly tossing crest the reason of this fury. The blood was pouring from his left eye, penetrated by the last bullet; the bull was blinded! A terrible revulsion of feeling, a sudden sense of remorse that was for the moment more awful than even his previous fear, overcame him. *He* had done *that thing!* As much to fly from the dreadful spectacle as any instinct of self-preservation, he took advantage of the next mad paroxysms of pain and blindness, that always impelled the suffering beast towards the left, to slip past him on the

right, reach the incline, and scramble wildly up to the plain again. Here he ran confusedly forward, not knowing whither — only caring to escape that agonized bellowing, to shut out forever the accusing look of that huge blood-weltering eye.

Suddenly he heard a distant angry shout. To his first hurried glance the plain had seemed empty, but, looking up, he saw two horsemen rapidly advancing with a led horse behind them — his own. With the blessed sense of relief that overtook him now came the fevered desire for sympathy and to tell them all. But as they came nearer he saw that they were Gildersleeve, the scout, and Henry Benham, and that, far from sharing any delight in his deliverance, their faces only exhibited irascible impatience. Overcome by this new defeat, the boy stopped, again dumb and dogged.

"Now, then, blank it all, *will* you get up and come along, or do you reckon to keep the train waiting another hour over your blanked foolishness?" said Gildersleeve savagely.

The boy hesitated, and then mounted mechanically, without a word.

"'T would have served 'em right to have gone and left 'em," muttered Benham vindictively.

For one wild instant Clarence thought of throwing himself from his horse and bidding them go on and leave him. But before he could put this thought into action the two men were galloping forward, with his horse led by a lariat fastened to the horn of Gildersleeve's saddle.

In two hours more they had overtaken the train, already on the march, and were in the midst of the group of outriders. Judge Peyton's face, albeit a trifle perplexed, turned towards Clarence with a kindly, half-tolerant look of welcome. The boy's heart instantly melted with forgiveness.

"Well, my boy, let's hear *your* story. What happened?"

Clarence cast a hurried glance around, and saw Jim, with face averted, riding gloomily behind. Then nervously and hurriedly he told how he had been thrown into the gully on the back of the wounded buffalo, and the manner of his escape. An audible titter ran through the cavalcade. Mr. Peyton regarded him gravely. "But how did the buffalo get so conveniently into the gully?" he asked.

"Jim Hooker lamed him with a shot-gun, and he fell over," said Clarence timidly.

A roar of Homeric laughter went up from the party. Clarence looked up, stung and startled, but caught a single glimpse of Jim Hooker's face that made him forget his own mortification. In its hopeless, heart-sick, and utterly beaten dejection — the first and only real expression he had seen on it — he read the dreadful truth. Jim's *reputation* had ruined him! The one genuine and striking episode of his life, the one trustworthy account he had given of it, had been unanimously accepted as the biggest and most consummate lie of his record!

CHAPTER VII

With this incident of the hunt closed, to Clarence, the last remembered episode of his journey. But he did not know until long after that it had also closed to him what might have been the opening of a new career. For it had been Judge Peyton's intention in adopting Susy to include a certain guardianship and protection of the boy, provided he could get the consent of that vague relation to whom he was consigned. But it had been pointed out by Mrs. Peyton and her brother that Clarence's association with Jim Hooker had made him a doubtful companion for Susy, and even the Judge himself was forced to admit that the boy's apparent taste for evil company was inconsistent with his alleged birth and breeding. Unfortunately, Clarence, in the conviction of being hopelessly misunderstood, and that dogged acquiescence to fate which was one of his characteristics, was too proud to correct the impression by any of the hypocrisies of childhood. He had also a cloudy instinct of loyalty to Jim in his disgrace, without, however, experiencing either the sympathy of an equal or the zeal of a partisan, but rather — if it could be said of a boy of his years — with the patronage and protection of a superior. So he accepted without demur the intimation that when the train reached California he would be forwarded from Stockton with an outfit and a letter of explanation to Sacramento, it being understood that in the event of not finding his relative he would return to the Peytons in one of the southern valleys, where they elected to purchase a tract of land.

With this outlook, and the prospect of change, independence, and all the rich possibilities that to the imagination of youth are included in them, Clarence had found the days dragging. The halt at Salt Lake, the transit of the dreary alkali desert, even the wild passage of the Sierras, were but a blurred picture in his memory. The sight of eternal snows and the rolling of endless ranks of pines, the first glimpse of a hillside of wild oats, the spectacle of a rushing yellow river that to his fancy seemed tinged with gold, were momentary excitements, quickly forgotten. But when, one morning, halting at the outskirts of a struggling settlement, he found the entire party eagerly gathered around a passing stranger, who had taken from his saddlebags a small buckskin pouch to show them a double handful of shining scales of metal, Clarence felt the first feverish and overmastering thrill of the gold-seekers. Breathlessly he followed the breathless questions and careless replies. The gold had been dug out of a placer only thirty miles away. It might be worth, say, a hundred and fifty dollars; it was only *his* share of a week's work with two partners. It was not much; "the country was getting played out with fresh arrivals and greenhorns." All this falling carelessly from the unshaven lips of a dusty, roughly dressed man, with a long-handled shovel and pickaxe strapped on his back, and a frying-pan depending from his saddle. But no panoplied or armed knight ever seemed so heroic or independent a figure to Clarence. What could be finer than the noble scorn conveyed in his critical survey of the train, with its comfortable covered wagons and appliances of civilization? "Ye 'll hev to get rid of them there fixin's if yer goin' in for placer diggin'!" What a corroboration of Clarence's real thoughts! What a picture of independence was this! The picturesque scout, the all-powerful Judge Peyton, the daring young officer, all crumbled on their clayey pedestals before

this hero in a red flannel shirt and high-topped boots. To stroll around in the open air all day, and pick up those shining bits of metal, without study, without method or routine — this was really life; to some day come upon that large nugget "you could n't lift," that was worth as much as the train and horses — such a one as the stranger said was found the other day at Sawyer's Bar — this was worth giving up everything for. That rough man, with his smile of careless superiority, was the living link between Clarence and the Thousand and One Nights; in him were Aladdin and Sindbad incarnate.

Two days later they reached Stockton. Here Clarence, whose single suit of clothes had been reinforced by patching, odds and ends from Peyton's stores, and an extraordinary costume of army cloth, got up by the regimental tailor of Fort Ridge, was taken to be refitted at a general furnishing "emporium." But alas! in the selection of the clothing for that adult locality scant provision seemed to have been made for a boy of Clarence's years, and he was with difficulty fitted from an old condemned Government stores with "a boy's" seaman suit and a brass-buttoned pea-jacket. To this outfit Mr. Peyton added a small sum of money for his expenses and a letter of explanation to his cousin. The stagecoach was to start at noon. It only remained for Clarence to take leave of the party. The final parting with Susy had been discounted on the two previous days with some tears, small frights and clingings, and the expressed determination on the child's part "to go with him;" but in the excitement of the arrival at Stockton it was still further mitigated, and under the influence of a little present from Clarence — his first disbursement of his small capital — had at last taken the form and promise of merely temporary separation. Nevertheless, when the boy's scanty pack was deposited under the stagecoach seat, and he had been left alone, he ran rapidly

back to the train for one moment more with Susy. Panting and a little frightened, he reached Mrs. Peyton's car.

"Goodness! You 're not gone yet," said Mrs. Peyton sharply. "Do you want to lose the stage?"

An instant before, in his loneliness, he might have answered, "Yes." But under the cruel sting of Mrs. Peyton's evident annoyance at his reappearance he felt his legs suddenly tremble, and his voice left him. He did not dare to look at Susy. But her voice rose comfortably from the depths of the wagon where she was sitting.

"The stage will be goned away, Kla'uns."

She too! Shame at his foolish weakness sent the yearning blood that had settled round his heart flying back into his face.

"I was looking for — for — for Jim, ma'am," he said at last boldly.

He saw a look of disgust pass over Mrs. Peyton's face, and felt a malicious satisfaction as he turned and ran back to the stage. But here, to his surprise, he actually found Jim, whom he really had n't thought of, darkly watching the last strapping of luggage. With a manner calculated to convey the impression to the other passengers that he was parting from a brother criminal, probably on his way to a state prison, Jim shook hands gloomily with Clarence, and eyed the other passengers furtively between his matted locks.

"Ef ye hear o' anythin' happenin', ye 'll know what 's up," he said in a low, hoarse, but perfectly audible whisper. "Me and them 's bound to part company afore long. Tell the fellows at Deadman's Gulch to look out for me at any time."

Although Clarence was not going to Deadman's Gulch, knew nothing of it, and had a faint suspicion that Jim was equally ignorant, yet as one or two of the passengers glanced anxiously at the demure, gray-eyed boy who seemed booked for such a baleful destination, he really felt the half-delighted, half-frightened consciousness that he

was starting in life under fascinating immoral pretenses. But the forward spring of the fine-spirited horses, the quickened motion, the glittering sunlight, and the thought that he really was leaving behind him all the shackles of dependence and custom, and plunging into a life of freedom, drove all else from his mind. He turned at last from this hopeful, blissful future, and began to examine his fellow passengers with boyish curiosity. Wedged in between two silent men on the front seat, one of whom seemed a farmer, and the other, by his black attire, a professional man, Clarence was finally attracted by a black-mantled, dark-haired, bonnetless woman on the back seat, whose attention seemed to be monopolized by the jocular gallantries of her companions and the two men before her in the middle seat. From her position he could see little more than her dark eyes, which occasionally seemed to meet his frank curiosity in an amused sort of way, but he was chiefly struck by the pretty foreign sound of her musical voice, which was unlike anything he had ever heard before, and — alas for the inconstancy of youth — much finer than Mrs. Peyton's. Presently his farmer companion, casting a patronizing glance on Clarence's pea-jacket and brass buttons, said cheerily: —

"Jest off a voyage, sonny?"

"No, sir," stammered Clarence; "I came across the plains."

"Then I reckon that 's the rig-out for the crew of a prairie schooner, eh?" There was a laugh at this which perplexed Clarence. Observing it, the humorist kindly condescended to explain that "prairie schooner" was the current slang for an emigrant wagon.

"I could n't," explained Clarence, naïvely looking at the dark eyes on the back seat, "get any clothes at Stockton but these; I suppose the folks did n't think there 'd ever be boys in California."

The simplicity of this speech evidently impressed the others, for the two men in the middle seats turned at a whisper from the lady and regarded him curiously. Clarence blushed slightly and became silent. Presently the vehicle began to slacken its speed. They were ascending a hill; on either bank grew huge cottonwoods, from which occasionally depended a beautiful scarlet vine.

"Ah! eet ees pretty," said the lady, nodding her black-veiled head towards it. "Eet is good in ze hair."

One of the men made an awkward attempt to clutch a spray from the window. A brilliant inspiration flashed upon Clarence. When the stage began the ascent of the next hill, following the example of an outside passenger, he jumped down to walk. At the top of the hill he rejoined the stage, flushed and panting, but carrying a small branch of the vine in his scratched hands. Handing it to the man on the middle seat, he said, with grave, boyish politeness — "Please — for the lady."

A slight smile passed over the face of Clarence's neighbors. The bonnetless woman nodded a pleasant acknowledgment, and coquettishly wound the vine in her glossy hair. The dark man at his side, who had n't spoken yet, turned to Clarence dryly.

"If you 're goin' to keep up this gait, sonny, I reckon ye won't find much trouble gettin' a man's suit to fit you by the time you reach Sacramento."

Clarence did n't quite understand him, but noticed that a singular gravity seemed to overtake the two jocular men on the middle seat, and the lady looked out of the window. He came to the conclusion that he had made a mistake about alluding to his clothes and his size. He must try and behave more manly. That opportunity seemed to be offered two hours later, when the stage stopped at a wayside hotel or restaurant.

Two or three passengers had got down to refresh them-

selves at the bar. His right and left hand neighbors were, however, engaged in a drawling conversation on the comparative merits of San Francisco sand-hill and water lots; the jocular occupants of the middle seat were still engrossed with the lady. Clarence slipped out of the stage and entered the bar-room with some ostentation. The complete ignoring of his person by the barkeeper and his customers, however, somewhat disconcerted him. He hesitated a moment, and then returned gravely to the stage door and opened it.

"Would you mind taking a drink with me, sir?" said Clarence politely, addressing the farmer-looking passenger who had been most civil to him. A dead silence followed. The two men on the middle seat faced entirely around to gaze at him.

"The Commodore asks if you 'll take a drink with him," explained one of the men to Clarence's friend with the greatest seriousness.

"Eh? Oh yes, certainly," returned that gentleman, changing his astonished expression to one of the deepest gravity, "seeing it 's the Commodore."

"And perhaps you and your friend will join, too?" said Clarence timidly to the passenger who had explained; "and you too, sir?" he added to the dark man.

"Really, gentlemen, I don't see how we can refuse," said the latter, with the greatest formality, and appealing to the others. "A compliment of this kind from our distinguished friend is not to be taken lightly."

"I have observed, sir, that the Commodore's head is level," returned the other man with equal gravity.

Clarence could have wished they had not treated his first hospitable effort quite so formally, but as they stepped from the coach with unbending faces he led them, a little frightened, into the bar-room. Here, unfortunately, as he was barely able to reach over the counter, the barkeeper

would have again overlooked him but for a quick glance from the dark man, which seemed to change even the barkeeper's perfunctory smiling face into supernatural gravity.

"The Commodore is standing treat," said the dark man, with unbroken seriousness, indicating Clarence, and leaning back with an air of respectful formality. "*I* will take straight whiskey. The Commodore, on account of just changing climate, will, I believe, for the present content himself with lemon soda."

Clarence had previously resolved to take whiskey, like the others, but a little doubtful of the politeness of countermanding his guest's order, and perhaps slightly embarrassed by the fact that all the other customers seemed to have gathered round him and his party with equally immovable faces, he said hurriedly: —

"Lemon soda for me, please."

"The Commodore," said the barkeeper, with impassive features, as he bent forward and wiped the counter with professional deliberation, "is right. No matter how much a man may be accustomed all his life to liquor, when he is changing climate, gentlemen, he says 'Lemon soda for me' all the time."

"Perhaps," said Clarence, brightening, "you will join too?"

"I shall be proud on this occasion, sir."

"I think," said the tall man, still as ceremoniously unbending as before, "that there can be but one toast here, gentlemen. I give you the health of the Commodore. May his shadow never be less."

The health was drunk solemnly. Clarence felt his cheeks tingle, and in his excitement drank his own health with the others. Yet he was disappointed that there was not more joviality; he wondered if men always drank together so stiffly. And it occurred to him that it would be expensive. Nevertheless, he had his purse all ready

ostentatiously in his hand; in fact, the paying for it out of his own money was not the least manly and independent pleasure he had promised himself. "How much?" he asked, with an affectation of carelessness.

The barkeeper cast his eye professionally over the bar-room. "I think you said treats for the crowd; call it twenty dollars to make even change."

Clarence's heart sank. He had heard already of the exaggeration of California prices. Twenty dollars! It was half his fortune. Nevertheless, with an heroic effort, he controlled himself, and with slightly nervous fingers counted out the money. It struck him, however, as curious, not to say ungentlemanly, that the bystanders craned their necks over his shoulder to look at the contents of his purse, although some slight explanation was offered by the tall man.

"The Commodore's purse, gentlemen, is really a singular one. Permit me," he said, taking it from Clarence's hand with great politeness. "It is one of the new pattern, you observe, quite worthy of inspection." He handed it to a man behind him, who in turn handed it to another, while a chorus of "suthin' quite new," "the latest style," followed it in its passage round the room, and indicated to Clarence its whereabouts. It was presently handed back to the barkeeper, who had begged also to inspect it, and who, with an air of scrupulous ceremony, insisted upon placing it himself in Clarence's side pocket, as if it were an important part of his function. The driver here called "all aboard." The passengers hurriedly reseated themselves, and the episode abruptly ended. For, to Clarence's surprise, these attentive friends of a moment ago at once became interested in the views of a new passenger concerning the local politics of San Francisco, and he found himself utterly forgotten. The bonnetless woman had changed her position, and her head was no longer visible. The

disillusion and depression that overcame him suddenly were as complete as his previous expectations and hopefulness had been extravagant. For the first time his utter unimportance in the world and his inadequacy to this new life around him came upon him crushingly.

The heat and jolting of the stage caused him to fall into a slight slumber, and when he awoke he found his two neighbors had just got out at a wayside station. They had evidently not cared to waken him to say "good-by." From the conversation of the other passengers he learned that the tall man was a well-known gambler, and the one who looked like a farmer was a ship captain who had become a wealthy merchant. Clarence thought he understood now why the latter had asked him if he came off a voyage, and that the nickname of "Commodore" given to him, Clarence, was some joke intended for the captain's understanding. He missed them, for he wanted to talk to them about his relative at Sacramento, whom he was now so soon to see. At last, between sleeping and waking, the end of his journey was unexpectedly reached. It was dark, but, being "steamer night," the shops and business places were still open, and Mr. Peyton had arranged that the stage-driver should deliver Clarence at the address of his relative in "J Street," — an address which Clarence had luckily remembered. But the boy was somewhat discomfited to find that it was a large office or banking-house. He, however, descended from the stage, and with his small pack in his hand entered the building as the stage drove off, and, addressing one of the busy clerks, asked for "Mr. Jackson Brant."

There was no such person in the office. There never had been any such person. The bank had always occupied that building. Was there not some mistake in the number? No; the name, number, and street had been deeply engrafted in the boy's recollection. Stop! it might be the

name of a customer who had given his address at the bank. The clerk who made this suggestion disappeared promptly to make inquiries in the counting-room. Clarence, with a rapidly beating heart, awaited him. The clerk returned. There was no such name on the books. Jackson Brant was utterly unknown to every one in the establishment.

For an instant the counter against which the boy was leaning seemed to yield with his weight; he was obliged to steady himself with both hands to keep from falling. It was not his disappointment, which was terrible; it was not a thought of his future, which seemed hopeless; it was not his injured pride at appearing to have willfully deceived Mr. Peyton, which was more dreadful than all these; but it was the sudden, sickening sense that *he* himself had been deceived, tricked, and fooled! For it flashed upon him for the first time that the vague sense of wrong which had always haunted him was this — that this was the vile culmination of a plan to *get rid of him*, and that he had been deliberately lost and led astray by his relatives as helplessly and completely as a useless cat or dog!

Perhaps there was something of this in his face, for the clerk, staring at him, bade him sit down for a moment, and again vanished into the mysterious interior. Clarence had no conception how long he was absent, or indeed of anything but his own breathless thoughts, for he was conscious of wondering afterwards why the clerk was leading him through a door in the counter into an inner room of many desks, and again through a glass door into a smaller office, where a preternaturally busy-looking man sat writing at a desk. Without looking up, but pausing only to apply a blotting-pad to the paper before him, the man said crisply: —

"So you 've been consigned to some one who don't seem to turn up, and can't be found, eh? Never mind that," as Clarence laid Peyton's letter before him. "Can't read

it now. Well, I suppose you want to be shipped back to Stockton?"

"No!" said the boy, recovering his voice with an effort.

"Eh, that 's business, though. Know anybody here?"

"Not a living soul; that 's why they sent me," said the boy in sudden reckless desperation. He was the more furious that he knew the tears were standing in his eyes.

The idea seemed to strike the man amusingly. "Looks a little like it, don't it?" he said, smiling grimly at the paper before him. "Got any money?"

"A little."

"How much?"

"About twenty dollars," said Clarence hesitatingly. The man opened a drawer at his side, mechanically, for he did not raise his eyes, and took out two ten-dollar gold pieces. "I 'll go twenty better," he said, laying them down on the desk. "That 'll give you a chance to look around. Come back here, if you don't see your way clear." He dipped his pen into the ink with a significant gesture as if closing the interview.

Clarence pushed back the coin. "I 'm not a beggar," he said doggedly.

The man this time raised his head and surveyed the boy with two keen eyes. "You 're not, hey? Well, do I look like one?"

"No," stammered Clarence, as he glanced into the man's haughty eyes.

"Yet, if I were in your fix, I 'd take that money and be glad to get it."

"If you 'll let me pay you back again," said Clarence, a little ashamed, and considerably frightened at his implied accusation of the man before him.

"You can," said the man, bending over his desk again.

Clarence took up the money and awkwardly drew out his purse. But it was the first time he had touched it

since it was returned to him in the bar-room, and it struck him that it was heavy and full — indeed, so full that on opening it a few coins rolled out on to the floor. The man looked up abruptly.

"I thought you said you had only twenty dollars?" he remarked grimly.

"Mr. Peyton gave me forty," returned Clarence, stupefied and blushing. "I spent twenty dollars for drinks at the bar — and," he stammered, "I — I — I don't know how the rest came here."

"You spent twenty dollars for *drinks?*" said the man, laying down his pen, and leaning back in his chair to gaze at the boy.

"Yes — that is — I treated some gentlemen of the stage, sir, at Davidson's Crossing."

"Did you treat the whole stage company?"

"No, sir, only about four or five — and the barkeeper. But everything 's so dear in California. *I* know that."

"Evidently. But it don't seem to make much difference with *you*," said the man, glancing at the purse.

"They wanted my purse to look at," said Clarence hurriedly, "and that 's how the thing happened. Somebody put *his own money* back into *my* purse by accident."

"Of course," said the man grimly.

"Yes, that 's the reason," said Clarence, a little relieved, but somewhat embarrassed by the man's persistent eyes.

"Then, of course," said the other quietly, "you don't require my twenty dollars now."

"But," returned Clarence hesitatingly, "this is n't *my* money. I must find out who it belongs to, and give it back again. Perhaps," he added timidly, "I might leave it here with you, and call for it when I find the man, or send him here."

With the greatest gravity he here separated the surplus from what was left of Peyton's gift and the twenty dollars

he had just received. The balance unaccounted for was forty dollars. He laid it on the desk before the man, who, still looking at him, rose and opened the door.

"Mr. Reed."

The clerk who had shown Clarence in appeared.

"Open an account with" — He stopped and turned interrogatively to Clarence.

"Clarence Brant," said Clarence, coloring with excitement.

"With Clarence Brant. Take that deposit" — pointing to the money — "and give him a receipt." He paused as the clerk retired with a wondering gaze at the money, looked again at Clarence, said, "I think *you'll* do," and reëntered the private office, closing the door behind him.

I hope it will not be deemed inconceivable that Clarence, only a few moments before crushed with bitter disappointment and the hopeless revelation of his abandonment by his relatives, now felt himself lifted up suddenly into an imaginary height of independence and manhood. He was leaving the bank, in which he stood a minute before a friendless boy, not as a successful beggar, for this important man had disclaimed the idea, but absolutely as a customer! a depositor! a business man like the grown-up clients who were thronging the other office, and before the eyes of the clerk who had pitied him! And he, Clarence, had been spoken to by this man, whose name he now recognized as the one that was on the door of the building — a man of whom his fellow passengers had spoken with admiring envy — a banker famous in all California! Will it be deemed incredible that this imaginative and hopeful boy, forgetting all else, the object of his visit, and even the fact that he considered this money was not his own, actually put his hat a little on one side as he strolled out on his way to the streets and prospective fortune?

Two hours later the banker had another visitor. It chanced to be the farmer-looking man who had been Clarence's fellow passenger. Evidently a privileged person, he was at once ushered as "Captain Stevens" into the presence of the banker. At the end of a familiar business interview the captain asked carelessly: —

"Any letters for me?"

The busy banker pointed with his pen to the letter "S" in a row of alphabetically labeled pigeon-holes against the wall. The captain, having selected his correspondence, paused with a letter in his hand.

"Look here, Carden, there 's a letter here for some chap called 'John Silsbee.' It was here when I called, ten weeks ago."

"Well?"

"That 's the name of that Pike County man who was killed by Injins in the plains. The 'Frisco papers had all the particulars last night; maybe it 's for that fellow. It has n't got a postmark. Who left it here?"

Mr. Carden summoned a clerk. It appeared that the letter had been left by a certain Brant Fauquier, to be called for.

Captain Stevens smiled. "Brant 's been too busy dealin' faro to think of 'em agin, and since that shootin' affair at Angels, I hear he 's skipped to the southern coast somewhere. Cal Johnson, his old chum, was in the up stage from Stockton this afternoon."

"Did you come by the up stage from Stockton this afternoon?" said Carden, looking up.

"Yes, as far as Ten-mile Station — rode the rest of the way here."

"Did you notice a queer little old-fashioned kid — about so high — like a runaway schoolboy?"

"Did I? By G—d! sir, he treated me to drinks."

Carden jumped from his chair. "Then he was n't lying!"

"No! We let him do it; but we made it good for the little chap afterwards. Hello! What 's up?"

But Mr. Carden was already in the outer office beside the clerk who had admitted Clarence.

"You remember that boy Brant who was here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where did he go?"

"Don't know, sir."

"Go and find him somewhere and somehow. Go to all the hotels, restaurants, and gin-mills near here, and hunt him up. Take some one with you, if you can't do it alone. Bring him back here, quick!"

It was nearly midnight when the clerk fruitlessly returned. It was the fierce high noon of "steamer nights;" light flashed brilliantly from shops, counting-houses, drinking-saloons, and gambling-hells. The streets were yet full of eager, hurrying feet — swift to fortune, ambition, pleasure, or crime. But from among these deeper, harsher footfalls the echo of the homeless boy's light, innocent tread seemed to have died out forever.

CHAPTER VIII

When Clarence was once more in the busy street before the bank, it seemed clear to his boyish mind that, being now cast adrift upon the world and responsible to no one, there was no reason why he should not at once proceed to the nearest gold mines! The idea of returning to Mr. Peyton and Susy, as a disowned and abandoned outcast, was not to be thought of. He would purchase some kind of an outfit, such as he had seen the miners carry, and start off as soon as he had got his supper. But although one of his most delightful anticipations had been the unfettered freedom of ordering a meal at a restaurant, on entering the first one he found himself the object of so much curiosity, partly from his size and partly from his dress, which the unfortunate boy was beginning to suspect was really preposterous, that he turned away with a stammered excuse, and did not try another. Further on he found a baker's shop, where he refreshed himself with some gingerbread and lemon soda. At an adjacent grocery he purchased some herrings, smoked beef, and biscuits, as future provisions for his "pack" or kit. Then began his real quest for an outfit. In an hour he had secured — ostensibly for some friend, to avoid curious inquiry — a pan, a blanket, a shovel and pick, all of which he deposited at the baker's, his unostentatious headquarters, with the exception of a pair of disguising high boots that half hid his sailor trousers, which he kept to put on at the last. Even to his inexperience the cost of these articles seemed enormous; when his purchases were complete, of his entire

capital scarcely four dollars remained! Yet in the fond illusions of boyhood these rude appointments seemed possessed of far more value than the gold he had given in exchange for them, and he had enjoyed a child's delight in testing the transforming magic of money.

Meanwhile, the feverish contact of the crowded street had, strange to say, increased his loneliness, while the ruder joviality of its dissipations began to fill him with a vague uneasiness. The passing glimpse of dancing-halls and gaudily whirling figures that seemed only feminine in their apparel; the shouts and boisterous choruses from concert rooms; the groups of drunken roisterers that congregated around the doors of saloons or, hilariously charging down the streets, elbowed him against the wall, or humorously insisted on his company, discomposed and frightened him. He had known rude companionship before, but it was serious, practical, and under control. There was something in this vulgar degradation of intellect and power — qualities that Clarence had always boyishly worshiped — which sickened and disillusioned him. Later on a pistol shot in a crowd beyond, the rush of eager men past him, the disclosure of a limp and helpless figure against the wall, the closing of the crowd again around it, although it stirred him with a fearful curiosity, actually shocked him less hopelessly than their brutish enjoyments and abandonment.

It was in one of these rushes that he had been crushed against a swinging door, which, giving way to his pressure, disclosed to his wondering eyes a long, glitteringly adorned, and brightly lit room, densely filled with a silent, attentive throng in attitudes of decorous abstraction and preoccupation, that even the shouts and tumult at its very doors could not disturb. Men of all ranks and conditions, plainly or elaborately clad, were grouped together under this magic spell of silence and attention. The tables before

them were covered with cards and loose heaps of gold and silver. A clicking, the rattling of an ivory ball, and the frequent, formal, lazy reiteration of some unintelligible sentence was all that he heard. But by a sudden instinct he *understood* it all. It was a gambling saloon!

Encouraged by the decorous stillness, and the fact that everybody appeared too much engaged to notice him, the boy drew timidly beside one of the tables. It was covered with a number of cards, on which were placed certain sums of money. Looking down, Clarence saw that he was standing before a card that as yet had nothing on it. A single player at his side looked up, glanced at Clarence curiously, and then placed half a dozen gold pieces on the vacant card. Absorbed in the general aspect of the room and the players, Clarence did not notice that his neighbor won twice, and even *thrice*, upon that card. Becoming aware, however, that the player, while gathering in his gains, was smilingly regarding him, he moved in some embarrassment to the other end of the table, where there seemed another gap in the crowd. It so chanced that here was also another vacant card. The previous neighbor of Clarence instantly shoved a sum of money across the table on the vacant card and won! At this the other players began to regard Clarence singularly, one or two of the spectators smiled, and the boy, coloring, moved awkwardly away. But his sleeve was caught by the successful player, who, detaining him gently, put three gold pieces into his hand.

"That 's *your* share, sonny," he whispered.

"Share — for what?" stammered the astounded Clarence.

"For bringing me 'the luck,'" said the man.

Clarence stared. "Am I — to — to play with it?" he said, glancing at the coins and then at the table, in ignorance of the stranger's meaning.

"No, no!" said the man hurriedly, "don't do that. You 'll lose it, sonny, sure! Don't you see, *you bring the luck to others*, not to yourself. Keep it, old man, and run home!"

"I don't want it! I won't have it!" said Clarence, with a swift recollection of the manipulation of his purse that morning, and a sudden distrust of all mankind.

"There!" He turned back to the table and laid the money on the first vacant card he saw. In another moment, as it seemed to him, it was raked away by the dealer. A sense of relief came over him.

"There!" said the man, with an awed voice and a strange, fatuous look in his eye. "What did I tell you? You see, it 's allus so! Now," he added roughly, "get up and get out o' this, afore you lose the boots and shirt off ye."

Clarence did not wait for a second command. With another glance round the room, he began to make his way through the crowd towards the front. But in that parting glance he caught a glimpse of a woman presiding over a "wheel of fortune" in a corner, whose face seemed familiar. He looked again, timidly. In spite of an extraordinary head-dress or crown that she wore as the "Goddess of Fortune," he recognized, twisted in its tinsel, a certain scarlet vine which he had seen before; in spite of the hoarse formula which she was continually repeating, he recognized the foreign accent. It was the woman of the stagecoach! With a sudden dread that she might recognize him, and likewise demand his services "for luck," he turned and fled.

Once more in the open air, there came upon him a vague loathing and horror of the restless madness and feverish distraction of this half-civilized city. It was the more powerful that it was vague, and the outcome of some inward instinct. He found himself longing for the pure air

and sympathetic loneliness of the plains and wilderness; he began to yearn for the companionship of his humble associates — the teamster, the scout Gildersleeve, and even Jim Hooker. But above all and before all was the wild desire to get away from these maddening streets and their bewildering occupants. He ran back to the baker's, gathered his purchases together, took advantage of a friendly doorway to strap them on his boyish shoulders, slipped into a side street, and struck out at once for the outskirts.

It had been his first intention to take stage to the nearest mining district, but the diminution of his small capital forbade that outlay, and he decided to walk there by the highroad, of whose general direction he had informed himself. In half an hour the lights of the flat, struggling city, and their reflection in the shallow, turbid river before it, had sunk well behind him. The air was cool and soft; a yellow moon swam in the slight haze that rose above the tules; in the distance a few scattered cottonwoods and sycamores marked like sentinels the road. When he had walked some distance he sat down beneath one of them to make a frugal supper from the dry rations in his pack, but in the absence of any spring he was forced to quench his thirst with a glass of water in a wayside tavern. Here he was good humoredly offered something stronger, which he declined, and replied to certain curious interrogations by saying that he expected to overtake his friends in a wagon further on. A new distrust of mankind had begun to make the boy an adept in innocent falsehood, the more deceptive as his careless, cheerful manner, the result of his relief at leaving the city, and his perfect ease in the loving companionship of night and nature, certainly gave no indication of his homelessness and poverty.

It was long past midnight when, weary in body, but still hopeful and happy in mind, he turned off the dusty road into a vast rolling expanse of wild oats, with the

same sense of security of rest as a traveler to his inn. Here, completely screened from view by the tall stalks of grain that rose thickly around him to the height of a man's shoulder, he beat down a few of them for a bed, on which he deposited his blanket. Placing his pack for a pillow, he curled himself up in his blanket, and speedily fell asleep.

He awoke at sunrise, refreshed, invigorated, and hungry. But he was forced to defer his first self-prepared breakfast until he had reached water, and a less dangerous place than the wild-oat field to build his first camp-fire. This he found a mile further on, near some dwarf willows on the bank of a half-dry stream. Of his various efforts to prepare his first meal, the fire was the most successful; the coffee was somewhat too substantially thick, and the bacon and herring lacked definiteness of quality from having been cooked in the same vessel. In this boyish picnic he missed Susy, and recalled, perhaps a little bitterly, her coldness at parting. But the novelty of his situation, the brilliant sunshine and sense of freedom, and the road already awakening to dusty life with passing teams, dismissed everything but the future from his mind. Readjusting his pack, he stepped on cheerily. At noon he was overtaken by a teamster, who in return for a match to light his pipe gave him a lift of a dozen miles. It is to be feared that Clarence's account of himself was equally fanciful with his previous story, and that the teamster parted from him with a genuine regret, and a hope that he would soon be overtaken by his friends along the road. "And mind that you ain't such a fool agin to let 'em make you tote their dod-blasted tools fur them!" he added unsuspectingly, pointing to Clarence's mining outfit. Thus saved the heaviest part of the day's journey, for the road was continually rising from the plains during the last six miles, Clarence was able yet to cover a considerable distance on

foot before he halted for supper. Here he was again fortunate. An empty lumber team watering at the same spring, its driver offered to take Clarence's purchases — for the boy had profited by his late friend's suggestion to personally detach himself from his equipment — to Buckeye Mills for a dollar, which would also include a "shake-down passage" for himself on the floor of the wagon. "I reckon you 've been foolin' away in Sacramento the money yer parents give yer fur return stage fare, eh? Don't lie, sonny," he added grimly, as the now artful Clarence smiled diplomatically. "I 've been thar myself!" Luckily, the excuse that he was "tired and sleepy" prevented further dangerous questioning, and the boy was soon really in deep slumber on the wagon floor.

He awoke betimes to find himself already in the mountains. Buckeye Mills was a straggling settlement, and Clarence prudently stopped any embarrassing inquiry from his friend by dropping off the wagon with his equipment as they entered it, and hurriedly saying "Good-by!" from a cross-road through the woods. He had learned that the nearest mining camp was five miles away, and its direction was indicated by a long wooden "flume," or water-way, that alternately appeared and disappeared on the flank of the mountain opposite. The cooler and drier air, the grateful shadow of pine and bay, and the spicy balsamic odors that everywhere greeted him thrilled and exhilarated him. The trail plunging sometimes into an undisturbed forest, he started the birds before him like a flight of arrows through its dim recesses; at times he hung breathlessly over the blue depths of cañons where the same forests were repeated a thousand feet below. Towards noon he struck into a rude road — evidently the thoroughfare of the locality — and was surprised to find that it, as well as the adjacent soil wherever disturbed, was a deep Indian red. Everywhere, along its sides, powdering the banks

and boles of trees with its ruddy stain, in mounds and hillocks of piled dirt on the road, or in liquid paint-like pools, when a trickling stream had formed a gutter across it, there was always the same deep sanguinary color. Once or twice it became more vivid in contrast with the white teeth of quartz that peeped through it from the hillside or crossed the road in crumbled strata. One of those pieces Clarence picked up with a quickened pulse. It was veined and streaked with shining mica and tiny glittering cubes of mineral that *looked* like gold!

The road now began to descend towards a winding stream, shrunken by drought and ditching, that glared dazzlingly in the sunlight from its white bars of sand, or glistened in shining sheets and channels. Along its banks, and even encroaching upon its bed, were scattered a few mud cabins, strange-looking wooden troughs and gutters, and here and there, glancing through the leaves, the white canvas of tents. The stumps of felled trees and blackened spaces, as of recent fires, marked the stream on either side. A sudden sense of disappointment overcame Clarence. It looked vulgar, common, and worse than all — *familiar*. It was like the unlovely outskirts of a dozen other prosaic settlements he had seen in less romantic localities. In that muddy red stream, pouring out of a wooden gutter, in which three or four bearded, slouching, half-naked figures were raking like *chiffonniers*, there was nothing to suggest the royal metal. Yet he was so absorbed in gazing at the scene, and had walked so rapidly during the past few minutes, that he was startled, on turning a sharp corner of the road, to come abruptly upon an outlying dwelling.

It was a nondescript building, half canvas and half boards. The interior seen through the open door was fitted up with side shelves, a counter carelessly piled with provisions, groceries, clothing, and hardware — with no attempt at display or even ordinary selection — and a table,

on which stood a demijohn and three or four dirty glasses. Two roughly dressed men, whose long, matted beards and hair left only their eyes and lips visible in the tangled hirsute wilderness below their slouched hats, were leaning against the opposite sides of the doorway, smoking. Almost thrown against them in the rapid momentum of his descent, Clarence halted violently.

"Well, sonny, you need n't capsize the shanty," said the first man, without taking his pipe from his lips.

"If yer looking fur yer ma, she and yer Aunt Jane hev jest gone over to Parson Doolittle's to take tea," observed the second man lazily. "She allowed that you 'd wait."

"I 'm — I 'm — going to — to the mines," explained Clarence, with some hesitation. "I suppose this is the way?"

The two men took their pipes from their lips, looked at each other, completely wiped every vestige of expression from their faces with the back of their hands, turned their eyes into the interior of the cabin, and said, "Will yer come yer, now *will* yer?" Thus adjured, half a dozen men, also bearded and carrying pipes in their mouths, straggled out of the shanty, and, filing in front of it, squatted down, with their backs against the boards, and gazed comfortably at the boy. Clarence began to feel uneasy.

"I 'll give," said one, taking out his pipe and grimly eying Clarence, "a hundred dollars for him as he stands."

"And seein' as he 's got that bran'-new rig-out o' tools," said another, "I 'll give a hundred and fifty — and the drinks. I 've been," he added apologetically, "wantin' suthin' like this a long time."

"Well, gen'lemen," said the man who had first spoken to him, "lookin' at him by and large; takin' in, so to speak, the gin'ral gait of him in single harness; bearin' in mind the perfect freshness of him, and the coolness and

size of his cheek — the easy downiness, previousness, and utter don't-care-a-damnativeness of his coming yer, I think two hundred ain't too much for him, and we 'll call it a bargain."

Clarence's previous experience of this grim, smileless Californian chaff was not calculated to restore his confidence. He drew away from the cabin, and repeated doggedly, "I asked you if this was the way to the mines."

"It *are* the mines, and these yere are the miners," said the first speaker gravely. "Permit me to interdoose 'em. This yere 's Shasta Jim, this yere 's Shortcard Billy, this is Nasty Bob, and this Slumgullion Dick. This yere 's the Dook o' Chatham Street, the Livin' Skeleton, and me!"

"May we ask, fair young sir," said the Living Skeleton, who, however, seemed in fairly robust condition, "whence came ye on the wings of the morning, and whose Marble Halls ye hev left desolate?"

"I came across the plains, and got into Stockton two days ago on Mr. Peyton's train," said Clarence indignantly, seeing no reason now to conceal anything. "I came to Sacramento to find my cousin, who is n't living there any more. I don't see anything funny in *that!* I came here to the mines to dig gold — because — because Mr. Silsbee, the man who was to bring me here and might have found my cousin for me, was killed by Indians."

"Hold up, sonny. Let me help ye," said the first speaker, rising to his feet. "*You* did n't get killed by Injins because you got lost out of a train with Silsbee's infant darter. Peyton picked you up while you was takin' care of her, and two days arter you kem up to the broken-down Silsbee wagons, with all the folks lyin' there slartered."

"Yes, sir," said Clarence, breathless with astonishment.

"And," continued the man, putting his hand gravely to his head as if to assist his memory, "when you was all

alone on the plains with that little child you saw one of those redskins, as near to you as I be, watchin' the train, and you did n't breathe or move while he was there?"

"Yes, sir," said Clarence eagerly.

"And you was shot at by Peyton, he thinkin' you was an Injin in the mesquite grass? And you once shot a buffalo that had been pitched with you down a gully — all by yourself?"

"Yes," said Clarence, crimson with wonder and pleasure. "You know me, then?"

"Well, ye-e-es," said the man gravely, parting his mustache with his fingers. "You see, *you 've been here before.*"

"Before! Me?" repeated the astounded Clarence.

"Yes, before. Last night. You was taller then, and had n't cut your hair. You cursed a good deal more than you do now. You drank a man's share of whiskey, and you borrowed fifty dollars to get to Sacramento with. I reckon you have n't got it about you now, eh?"

Clarence's brain reeled in utter confusion and hopeless terror.

Was he going crazy, or had these cruel men learned his story from his faithless friends, and this was a part of the plot? He staggered forward, but the men had risen and quickly encircled him, as if to prevent his escape. In vague and helpless desperation he gasped: —

"What place is this?"

"Folks call it Deadman's Gulch."

Deadman's Gulch! A flash of intelligence lit up the boy's blind confusion. Deadman's Gulch! Could it have been Jim Hooker who had really run away, and had taken his name? He turned half imploringly to the first speaker.

"Was n't he older than me, and bigger? Did n't he have a smooth, round face and little eyes? Did n't he talk hoarse? Did n't he" — He stopped hopelessly.

"Yes; oh, he was n't a bit like you," said the man musingly. "Ye see, that 's the h–ll of it! You 're altogether *too many* and *too various* fur this camp."

"I don't know who 's been here before, or what they have said," said Clarence desperately, yet even in that desperation retaining the dogged loyalty to his old playmate which was part of his nature. "I don't know, and I don't care — there! I 'm Clarence Brant, of Kentucky; I started in Silsbee's train from St. Jo, and I 'm going to the mines, and you can't stop me!"

The man who had first spoken started, looked keenly at Clarence, and then turned to the others. The gentleman known as the Living Skeleton had obtruded his huge bulk in front of the boy, and, gazing at him, said reflectively, "Darned if it don't look like one of Brant's pups — sure!"

"Air ye any relation to Kernel Hamilton Brant, of Looeyville?" asked the first speaker.

Again that old question! Poor Clarence hesitated, despairingly. Was he to go through the same cross-examination he had undergone with the Peytons? "Yes," he said doggedly, "I am — but he 's dead, and you know it."

"Dead — of course." "Sartin." "He 's dead." "The kernel 's planted," said the men in chorus.

"Well, yes," reflected the Living Skeleton ostentatiously, as one who spoke from experience. "Ham Brant 's about as bony now as they make 'em."

"You bet! About the dustiest, deadest corpse you kin turn out," corroborated Slumgullion Dick, nodding his head gloomily to the others; "in point o' fack, es a corpse, about the last one I should keer to go huntin' fur."

"The kernel's tech 'ud be cold and clammy," concluded the Duke of Chatham Street, who had not yet spoken, "sure. But what did yer mammy say about it? Is she gettin' married agin? Did she send ye here?"

It seemed to Clarence that the Duke of Chatham Street

here received a kick from his companions; but the boy repeated doggedly: —

"I came to Sacramento to find my cousin, Jackson Brant; but he was n't there."

"Jackson Brant!" echoed the first speaker, glancing at the others. "Did your mother say he was your cousin?"

"Yes," said Clarence wearily. "Good-by."

"Hullo, sonny, where are you going?"

"To dig gold," said the boy. "And you know you can't prevent me, if it is n't on your claim. I know the law." He had heard Mr. Peyton discuss it at Stockton, and he fancied that the men, who were whispering among themselves, looked kinder than before, and as if they were no longer "acting" to him. The first speaker laid his hand on his shoulder, and said, "All right, come with me, and I 'll show you where to dig."

"Who are you?" said Clarence. "You called yourself only 'me.'"

"Well, you can call me Flynn — Tom Flynn."

"And you 'll show me where I can dig — myself?"

"I will."

"Do you know," said Clarence timidly, yet with a half-conscious smile, "that I — I kinder bring luck?"

The man looked down upon him, and said gravely, but, as it struck Clarence, with a new kind of gravity, "I believe you."

"Yes," said Clarence eagerly, as they walked along together, "I brought luck to a man in Sacramento the other day." And he related with great earnestness his experience in the gambling saloon. Not content with that — the sealed fountains of his childish deep being broken up by some mysterious sympathy — he spoke of his hospitable exploit with the passengers at the wayside bar, of the finding of his Fortunatus' purse and his deposit at the bank. Whether that characteristic old-fashioned reticence which

had been such an important factor for good or ill in his future had suddenly deserted him, or whether some extraordinary prepossession in his companion had affected him, he did not know; but by the time the pair had reached the hillside Flynn was in possession of all the boy's history. On one point only was his reserve unshaken. Conscious although he was of Jim Hooker's duplicity, he affected to treat it as a comrade's joke.

They halted at last in the middle of an apparently fertile hillside. Clarence shifted his shovel from his shoulders, unslung his pan, and looked at Flynn. "Dig anywhere here, where you like," said his companion carelessly, "and you 'll be sure to find the color. Fill your pan with the dirt, go to that sluice, and let the water run in on the top of the pan — workin' it round so," he added, illustrating a rotary motion with the vessel. "Keep doing that until all the soil is washed out of it, and you have only the black sand at the bottom. Then work that the same way until you see the color. Don't be afraid of washing the gold out of the pan — you could n't do it if you tried. There, I 'll leave you here, and you wait till I come back." With another grave nod and something like a smile in the only visible part of his bearded face — his eyes — he strode rapidly away.

Clarence did not lose time. Selecting a spot where the grass was less thick, he broke through the soil and turned up two or three spadefuls of red soil. When he had filled the pan and raised it to his shoulder, he was astounded at its weight. He did not know that it was due to the red precipitate of iron that gave it its color. Staggering along with his burden to the running sluice, which looked like an open wooden gutter, at the foot of the hill, he began to carefully carry out Flynn's direction. The first dip of the pan in the running water carried off half the contents of the pan in liquid paint-like ooze. For a moment he gave

I've just found gold

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way to boyish satisfaction in the sight and touch of this unctuous solution, and dabbled his fingers in it. A few moments more of rinsing and he came to the sediment of fine black sand that was beneath it. Another plunge and swilling of water in the pan, and — could he believe his eyes! — a few yellow tiny scales, scarcely larger than pins' heads, glittered among the sand. He poured it off. But his companion was right; the lighter sand shifted from side to side with the water, but the glittering points remained adhering by their own tiny specific gravity to the smooth surface of the bottom. It was "the color" — gold!

Clarence's heart seemed to give a great leap within him. A vision of wealth, of independence, of power, sprang before his dazzled eyes, and — a hand lightly touched him on the shoulder.

He started. In his complete preoccupation and excitement, he had not heard the clatter of horse-hoofs, and to his amazement Flynn was already beside him, mounted, and leading a second horse.

"You kin ride?" he said shortly.

"Yes," stammered Clarence; "but" —

"*But* — we 've only got two hours to reach Buckeye Mills in time to catch the down stage. Drop all that, jump up, and come with me!"

"But I 've just found gold," said the boy excitedly.

"And I 've just found your — cousin. Come!"

He spurred his horse across Clarence's scattered implements, half helped, half lifted, the boy into the saddle of the second horse, and, with a cut of his riata over the animal's haunches, the next moment they were both galloping furiously away.

CHAPTER IX

Torn suddenly from his prospective future, but too much dominated by the man beside him to protest, Clarence was silent until a rise in the road, a few minutes later, partly abated their headlong speed, and gave him chance to recover his breath and courage.

"Where is my cousin?" he asked.

"In the Southern county, two hundred miles from here."

"Are we going to him?"

"Yes."

They rode furiously forward again. It was nearly half an hour before they came to a longer ascent. Clarence could see that Flynn was from time to time examining him curiously under his slouched hat. This somewhat embarrassed him, but in his singular confidence in the man no distrust mingled with it.

"Ye never saw your — cousin?" he asked.

"No," said Clarence; "nor he me. I don't think he knew me much, anyway."

"How old mout ye be, Clarence?"

"Eleven."

"Well, as you 're suthin' of a pup" — Clarence started, and recalled Peyton's first criticism of him — "I reckon to tell ye suthin'. Ye ain't goin' to be skeert, or afeard, or lose yer sand, I kalkilate, for skunkin' ain't in your breed. Well, wot ef I told ye that thish yer — thish yer — *cousin* o' yours was the biggest devil onhung; that he 'd just killed a man, and had to lite out elsewhere, and thet 's

why he did n't show up in Sacramento — what if I told you that?"

Clarence felt that this was somehow a little too much. He was perfectly truthful, and lifting his frank eyes to Flynn, he said: —

"I should think you were talking a good deal like Jim Hooker!"

His companion stared, and suddenly reined up his horse; then, bursting into a shout of laughter, he galloped ahead, from time to time shaking his head, slapping his legs, and making the dim woods ring with his boisterous mirth. Then as suddenly becoming thoughtful again, he rode on rapidly for half an hour, only speaking to Clarence to urge him forward, and assisting his progress by lashing the haunches of his horse. Luckily, the boy was a good rider — a fact which Flynn seemed to thoroughly appreciate — or he would have been unseated a dozen times.

At last the straggling sheds of Buckeye Mills came into softer purple view on the opposite mountain. Then laying his hand on Clarence's shoulder as he reined in at his side, Flynn broke the silence.

"There, boy," he said, wiping the mirthful tears from his eyes. "I was only foolin' — only tryin' yer grit! This yer cousin I 'm taking you to ez as quiet and soft-spoken and as old-fashioned ez you be. Why, he 's that wrapped up in books and study that he lives alone in a big adobe rancherie among a lot o' Spanish, and he don't keer to see his own countrymen! Why, he 's even changed his name, and calls himself Don Juan Robinson! But he 's very rich; he owns three leagues of land and heaps of cattle and horses, and," glancing approvingly at Clarence's seat in the saddle, "I reckon you 'll hev plenty of fun thar."

"But," hesitated Clarence, to whom this proposal seemed only a repetition of Peyton's charitable offer, "I think I 'd better stay here and dig gold — *with you.*"

"And I think you 'd better not," said the man, with a gravity that was very like a settled determination.

"But my cousin never came for me to Sacramento — nor sent, nor even wrote," persisted Clarence indignantly.

"Not to *you*, boy; but he wrote to the man whom he reckoned would bring you there — Jack Silsbee — and left it in the care of the bank. And Silsbee, being dead, did n't come for the letter; and as you did n't ask for it when you came, and did n't even mention Silsbee's name, that same letter was sent back to your cousin through me, because the bank thought we knew his whereabouts. It came to the gulch by an express rider, whilst you were prospectin' on the hillside. Rememberin' your story, I took the liberty of opening it, and found out that your cousin had told Silsbee to bring you straight to him. So I 'm only doin' now what Silsbee would have done."

Any momentary doubt or suspicion that might have risen in Clarence's mind vanished as he met his companion's steady and masterful eye. Even his disappointment was forgotten in the charm of this new-found friendship and protection. And as its outset had been marked by an unusual burst of confidence on Clarence's part, the boy, in his gratitude, now felt something of the timid shyness of a deeper feeling, and once more became reticent.

They were in time to snatch a hasty meal at Buckeye Mills before the stage arrived, and Clarence noticed that his friend, despite his rough dress and lawless aspect, provoked a marked degree of respect from those he met — in which, perhaps, a wholesome fear was mingled. It is certain that the two best places in the stage were given up to them without protest, and that a careless, almost supercilious invitation to drink from Flynn was responded to with singular alacrity by all, including even two fastidiously dressed and previously reserved passengers. I am afraid that Clarence enjoyed this proof of his friend's sin-

gular dominance with a boyish pride, and, conscious of the curious eyes of the passengers, directed occasionally to himself, was somewhat ostentatious in his familiarity with this bearded autocrat.

At noon the next day they left the stage at a wayside road station, and Flynn briefly informed Clarence that they must again take horses. This at first seemed difficult in that out-of-the-way settlement, where they alone had stopped, but a whisper from the driver in the ear of the station-master produced a couple of fiery mustangs, with the same accompaniment of cautious awe and mystery. For the next two days they traveled on horseback, resting by night at the lodgings of one or other of Flynn's friends in the outskirts of a large town, where they arrived in the darkness, and left before day. To any one more experienced than the simple-minded boy it would have been evident that Flynn was purposely avoiding the more traveled roads and conveyances; and when they changed horses again, the next day's ride was through an apparently unbroken wilderness of scattered wood and rolling plain. Yet to Clarence, with his pantheistic reliance and joyous sympathy with nature, the change was filled with exhilarating pleasure. The vast seas of tossing wild oats, the hillside still variegated with strange flowers, the virgin freshness of untrodden woods and leafy aisles, whose floors of moss or bark were undisturbed by human footprint, were a keen delight and novelty. More than this, his quick eye, trained perceptions, and frontier knowledge now stood him in good stead. His intuitive sense of distance, instincts of woodcraft, and his unerring detection of those signs, landmarks, and guide-posts of nature, undistinguishable to aught but birds and beasts and some children, were now of the greatest service to his less favored companion. In this part of their strange pilgrimage it was the boy who took the lead. Flynn, who during the past two days seemed

to have fallen into a mood of watchful reserve, nodded his approbation. "This sort of thing 's yer best holt, boy," he said. "Men and cities ain't your little game."

At the next stopping-place Clarence had a surprise. They had again entered a town at nightfall, and lodged with another friend of Flynn's in rooms which from vague sounds appeared to be over a gambling saloon. Clarence woke late in the morning, and, descending into the street to mount for the day's journey, was startled to find that Flynn was not on the other horse, but that a well-dressed and handsome stranger had taken his place. But a laugh, and the familiar command, "Jump up, boy," made him look again. It *was* Flynn, but completely shaven of beard and mustache, closely clipped of hair, and in a fastidiously cut suit of black!

"Then you did n't know me?" said Flynn.

"Not till you spoke," replied Clarence.

"So much the better," said his friend sententiously, as he put spurs to his horse. But as they cantered through the street, Clarence, who had already become accustomed to the stranger's hirsute adornment, felt a little more awe of him. The profile of the mouth and chin now exposed to his sidelong glance was hard and stern, and slightly saturnine. Although unable at the time to identify it with anybody he had ever known, it seemed to the imaginative boy to be vaguely connected with some sad experience. But the eyes were thoughtful and kindly, and the boy later believed that if he had been more familiar with the face he would have loved it better. For it was the last and only day he was to see it, as, late that afternoon, after a dusty ride along more traveled highways, they reached their journey's end.

It was a low-walled house, with red-tiled roofs showing against the dark green of venerable pear and fig trees, and a square courtyard in the centre, where they had dis-

mounted. A few words in Spanish from Flynn to one of the lounging peons admitted them to a wooden corridor, and thence to a long, low room, which to Clarence's eyes seemed literally piled with books and engravings. Here Flynn hurriedly bade him stay while he sought the host in another part of the building. But Clarence did not miss him; indeed, it may be feared, he forgot even the object of their journey in the new sensations that suddenly thronged upon him, and the boyish vista of the future that they seemed to open. He was dazed and intoxicated. He had never seen so many books before; he had never conceived of such lovely pictures. And yet in some vague way he thought he must have dreamt of them at some time. He had mounted a chair, and was gazing spellbound at an engraving of a sea-fight, when he heard Flynn's voice.

His friend had quietly reëntered the room, in company with an oldish, half-foreign-looking man, evidently his relation. With no helping recollection, with no means of comparison beyond a vague idea that his cousin might look like himself, Clarence stood hopelessly before him. He had already made up his mind that he would have to go through the usual cross-questioning in regard to his father and family; he had even forlornly thought of inventing some innocent details to fill out his imperfect and unsatisfactory recollection. But, glancing up, he was surprised to find that his elderly cousin was as embarrassed as he was. Flynn, as usual, masterfully interposed.

"Of course ye don't remember each other, and thar ain't much that either of you knows about family matters, I reckon," he said grimly; "and as your cousin calls himself Don Juan Robinson," he added to Clarence, "it 's just as well that you let 'Jackson Brant' slide. I know him better than you, but you 'll get used to him, and he to you, soon enough. At least, you 'd better," he concluded, with his singular gravity.

As he turned as if to leave the room with Clarence's embarrassed relative — much to that gentleman's apparent relief — the boy looked up at the latter and said timidly: —

"May I look at those books?"

His cousin stopped, and glanced at him with the first expression of interest he had shown.

"Ah, you read; you like books?"

"Yes," said Clarence. As his cousin remained still looking at him thoughtfully, he added, "My hands are pretty clean, but I can wash them first, if you like."

"You may look at them," said Don Juan smilingly; "and as they are old books you can wash your hands afterwards." And, turning to Flynn suddenly, with an air of relief, "I tell you what I'll do — I'll teach him Spanish!"

They left the room together, and Clarence turned eagerly to the shelves. They were old books, some indeed very old, queerly bound, and worm-eaten. Some were in foreign languages, but others in clear, bold English type, with quaint wood-cuts and illustrations. One seemed to be a chronicle of battles and sieges, with pictured representations of combatants spitted with arrows, cleanly lopped off in limb, or toppled over distinctly by visible cannon-shot. He was deep in its perusal when he heard the clatter of horse's hoofs in the courtyard and the voice of Flynn. He ran to the window, and was astonished to see his friend already on horseback, taking leave of his host.

For one instant Clarence felt one of those sudden revulsions of feeling common to his age, but which he had always timidly hidden under dogged demeanor. Flynn, his only friend! Flynn, his only boyish confidant! Flynn, his latest hero, was going away and forsaking him without a word of parting! It was true that he had only agreed to take him to his guardian, but still Flynn need not have left him without a word of hope or encourage-

ment! With any one else Clarence would probably have taken refuge in his usual Indian stoicism, but the same feeling that had impelled him to offer Flynn his boyish confidences on their first meeting now overpowered him. He dropped his book, ran out into the corridor, and made his way to the courtyard, just as Flynn galloped out from the arch.

But the boy uttered a despairing shout that reached the rider. He drew rein, wheeled, halted, and sat facing Clarence impatiently. To add to Clarence's embarrassment his cousin had lingered in the corridor, attracted by the interruption, and a peon, lounging in the archway, obsequiously approached Flynn's bridle-rein. But the rider waved him off, and, turning sternly to Clarence, said: —

"What 's the matter now?"

"Nothing," said Clarence, striving to keep back the hot tears that rose in his eyes. "But you were going away without saying 'good-by.' You 've been very kind to me, and — and — I want to thank you!"

A deep flush crossed Flynn's face. Then glancing suspiciously towards the corridor, he said hurriedly: —

"Did *he* send you?"

"No, I came myself. I heard you going."

"All right. Good-by." He leaned forward as if about to take Clarence's outstretched hand, checked himself suddenly with a grim smile, and taking from his pocket a gold coin handed it to the boy.

Clarence took it, tossed it with a proud gesture to the waiting peon, who caught it thankfully, drew back a step from Flynn, and saying, with white cheeks, "I only wanted to say good-by," dropped his hot eyes to the ground. But it did not seem to be his own voice that had spoken, nor his own self that had prompted the act.

There was a quick interchange of glances between the departing guest and his late host, in which Flynn's eyes

flashed with an odd, admiring fire, but when Clarence raised his head again he was gone. And as the boy turned back with a broken heart towards the corridor, his cousin laid his hand upon his shoulder.

"*Muy hidalgamente*, Clarence," he said pleasantly. "Yes, we shall make something of you!"

CHAPTER X

THEN followed to Clarence three uneventful years. During that interval he learnt that Jackson Brant, or Don Juan Robinson — for the tie of kinship was the least factor in their relations to each other, and after the departure of Flynn was tacitly ignored by both — was more Spanish than American. An early residence in Lower California, marriage with a rich Mexican widow, whose dying childless left him sole heir, and some strange restraining idiosyncrasy of temperament had quite denationalized him. A bookish recluse, somewhat superfastidious towards his own countrymen, the more Clarence knew him the more singular appeared his acquaintance with Flynn; but as he did not exhibit more communicativeness on this point than upon their own kinship, Clarence finally concluded that it was due to the dominant character of his former friend, and thought no more about it. He entered upon the new life at El Refugio with no disturbing past. Quickly adapting himself to the lazy freedom of this hacienda existence, he spent the mornings on horseback ranging the hills among his cousin's cattle, and the afternoons and evenings busied among his cousin's books with equally lawless and undisciplined independence. The easy-going Don Juan, it is true, attempted to make good his rash promise to teach the boy Spanish, and actually set him a few tasks; but in a few weeks the quick-witted Clarence acquired such a colloquial proficiency from his casual acquaintance with vaqueros and small traders that he was glad to leave the matter in his young kinsman's hands. Again, by one

of those illogical sequences which make a lifelong reputation depend upon a single trivial act, Clarence's social status was settled forever at El Refugio Rancho by his picturesque diversion of Flynn's parting gift. The grateful peon to whom the boy had scornfully tossed the coin repeated the act, gesture, and spirit of the scene to his companion, and Don Juan's unknown and youthful relation was at once recognized as *hijo de la familia*, and undeniably a hidalgo born and bred. But in the more vivid imagination of feminine El Refugio the incident reached its highest poetic form. "It is true, Mother of God," said Chucha of the Mill; "it was Domingo who himself relates it as it were the Creed. When the American escort has arrived with the young gentleman, this escort, look you, being not of the same quality, he is departing again without a word of permission. Comes to him at this moment my little hidalgo. 'You have yourself forgotten to take from me your demission,' he said. This escort, thinking to make his peace with a mere muchacho, gives to him a gold piece of twenty pesos. The little hidalgo has taken it *so*, and with the words, 'Ah! you would make of me your almoner to my cousin's people,' has given it at the moment to Domingo, and with a grace and fire admirable." But it is certain that Clarence's singular simplicity and truthfulness, a faculty of being picturesquely indolent in a way that suggested a dreamy abstraction of mind rather than any vulgar tendency to bodily ease and comfort, and possibly the fact that he was a good horseman, made him a popular hero at El Refugio. At the end of three years Don Juan found that this inexperienced and apparently idle boy of fourteen knew more of the practical ruling of the ranch than he did himself; also that this unlettered young rustic had devoured nearly all the books in his library with boyish recklessness of digestion. He found, too, that in spite of his singular

independence of action, Clarence was possessed of an invincible loyalty to principle, and that, asking no sentimental affection, and indeed yielding none, he was, without presuming on his relationship, devoted to his cousin's interest. It seemed that from being a glancing ray of sunshine in the house, evasive but never obtrusive, he had become a daily necessity of comfort and security to his benefactor.

Clarence was, however, astonished, when, one morning, Don Juan, with the same embarrassed manner he had shown at their first meeting, suddenly asked him, "what business he expected to follow." It seemed the more singular, as the speaker, like most abstracted men, had hitherto always studiously ignored the future, in their daily intercourse. Yet this might have been either the habit of security or the caution of doubt. Whatever it was, it was some sudden disturbance of Don Juan's equanimity, as disconcerting to himself as it was to Clarence. So conscious was the boy of this that, without replying to his cousin's question, but striving in vain to recall some delinquency of his own, he asked, with his usual boyish directness: —

"Has anything happened? Have I done anything wrong?"

"No, no," returned Don Juan hurriedly. "But, you see, it 's time that you should think of your future — or at least prepare for it. I mean you ought to have some more regular education. You will have to go to school. It 's too bad," he added fretfully, with a certain impatient forgetfulness of Clarence's presence, and as if following his own thought. "Just as you are becoming of service to me, and justifying your ridiculous position here — and all this d—d nonsense that 's gone before — I mean, of course, Clarence," he interrupted himself, catching sight of the boy's whitening cheek and darkening eye —"I mean,

you know — this ridiculousness of my keeping you from school at your age, and trying to teach you myself — don't you see?"

"You think it is — ridiculous," repeated Clarence, with dogged persistency.

"I mean *I* am ridiculous," said Don Juan hastily. "There! there! let 's say no more about it. To-morrow we 'll ride over to San José and see the Father Secretary at the Jesuits' College about your entering at once. It 's a good school, and you 'll always be near the rancho!" And so the interview ended.

I am afraid that Clarence's first idea was to run away. There are few experiences more crushing to an ingenuous nature than the sudden revelation of the aspect in which it is regarded by others. The unfortunate Clarence, conscious only of his loyalty to his cousin's interest and what he believed were the duties of his position, awoke to find that position "ridiculous." In an afternoon's gloomy ride through the lonely hills, and later in the sleepless solitude of his room at night, he concluded that his cousin was right. He would go to school; he would study hard — so hard that in a little, a very little while, he could make a living for himself. He awoke contented. It was the blessing of youth that this resolve and execution seemed as one and the same thing.

The next day found him installed as a pupil and boarder in the college. Don Juan's position and Spanish predilections naturally made his relation acceptable to the faculty; but Clarence could not help perceiving that Father Sobriente, the Principal, regarded him at times with a thoughtful curiosity that made him suspect that his cousin had especially bespoken that attention, and that he occasionally questioned him on his antecedents in a way that made him dread a renewal of the old questioning about his progenitor. For the rest, he was a polished, cultivated man; yet, in

the characteristic, material criticism of youth, I am afraid that Clarence chiefly identified him as a priest with large hands, whose soft palms seemed to be cushioned with kindness, and whose equally large feet, encased in extraordinary shapeless shoes of undyed leather, seemed to tread down noiselessly — rather than to ostentatiously crush — the obstacles that beset the path of the young student. In the cloistered galleries of the courtyard Clarence sometimes felt himself borne down by the protecting weight of this paternal hand; in the midnight silence of the dormitory he fancied he was often conscious of the soft browsing tread and snuffly muffled breathing of his elephantine-footed mentor.

His relations with his school fellows were at first far from pleasant. Whether they suspected favoritism; whether they resented that old and unsympathetic manner which sprang from his habits of association with his elders; or whether they rested their objections on the broader grounds of his being a stranger, I do not know, but they presently passed from cruel sneers to physical opposition. It was then found that this gentle and reserved youth had retained certain objectionable, rude, direct, rustic qualities of fist and foot, and that, violating all rules and disdaining the pomp and circumstance of schoolboy warfare, of which he knew nothing, he simply thrashed a few of his equals out of hand, with or without ceremony, as the occasion or the insult happened. In this emergency one of the seniors was selected to teach this youthful savage his proper position. A challenge was given, and accepted by Clarence with a feverish alacrity that surprised himself as much as his adversary. This was a youth of eighteen, his superior in size and skill. The first blow bathed Clarence's face in his own blood. But the sanguinary chrism, to the alarm of the spectators, effected an instantaneous and unhallowed change in the boy. Instantly closing with his

adversary, Clarence sprang at his throat, like an animal, and locking his arm around his neck began to strangle him. Blind to the blows that rained upon him, he eventually bore his staggering enemy by sheer onset and surprise to the earth. Amidst the general alarm, the strength of half a dozen hastily summoned teachers was necessary to unlock his hold. Even then he struggled to renew the conflict. But his adversary had disappeared, and from that day forward Clarence was never again molested.

Seated before Father Sobriente in the infirmary, with swollen and bandaged face, and eyes that still seemed to see everything in the murky light of his own blood, Clarence felt the soft weight of the father's hand upon his knee.

"My son," said the priest gently, "you are not of our religion, or I should claim as a right to ask a question of your own heart at this moment. But as to a good friend, Claro, a good friend," he continued, patting the boy's knee, "you will tell me, old Father Sobriente, frankly and truthfully, as is your habit, one little thing. Were you not afraid?"

"No," said Clarence doggedly. "I 'll lick him again to-morrow."

"Softly, my son! It was not of him I speak, but of something more terrible and awful. Were you not afraid of — of" — he paused, and suddenly darting his clear eyes into the very depths of Clarence's soul, added — "of *yourself?*"

The boy started, shuddered, and burst into tears.

"So, so," said the priest gently, "we have found our real enemy. Good! Now, by the grace of God, my little warrior, we shall fight *him* and conquer."

Whether Clarence profited by this lesson, or whether this brief exhibition of his quality prevented any repetition of the cause, the episode was soon forgotten. As his

school fellows had never been his associates or confidants, it mattered little to him whether they feared or respected him, or were hypocritically obsequious, after the fashion of the weaker. His studies, at all events, profited by this lack of distraction. Already his two years of desultory and omnivorous reading had given him a facile familiarity with many things, which left him utterly free of the timidity, awkwardness, or non-interest of a beginner. His usually reserved manner, which had been lack of expression rather than of conviction, had deceived his tutors. The audacity of a mind that had never been dominated by others, and owed no allegiance to precedent, made his merely superficial progress something marvelous.

At the end of the first year he was a phenomenal scholar, who seemed capable of anything. Nevertheless, Father Sobriente had an interview with Don Juan, and as a result Clarence was slightly kept back in his studies, a little more freedom from the rules was conceded to him, and he was even encouraged to take some diversion. Of such was the privilege to visit the neighboring town of Santa Clara unrestricted and unattended. He had always been liberally furnished with pocket-money, for which, in his companionless state and Spartan habits, he had a singular and unboyish contempt. Nevertheless, he always appeared dressed with scrupulous neatness, and was rather distinguished looking in his older reserve and melancholy self-reliance.

Lounging one afternoon along the Alameda, a leafy avenue set out by the early Mission Fathers between the village of San José and the Convent of Santa Clara, he saw a double file of young girls from the convent approaching, on their usual promenade. A view of this procession being the fondest ambition of the San José collegian, and especially interdicted and circumvented by the good Fathers attending the college excursions, Clarence felt for it the

profound indifference of a boy who, in the intermediate temperate zone of fifteen years, thinks that he is no longer young and romantic! He was passing them with a careless glance, when a pair of deep violet eyes caught his own under the broad shade of a coquettishly beribboned hat, even as they had once looked at him from the depths of a calico sunbonnet. Susy! He started, and would have spoken; but with a quick little gesture of caution and a meaning glance at the two nuns who walked at the head and foot of the file, she indicated him to follow. He did so at a respectful distance, albeit wondering. A little further on Susy dropped her handkerchief, and was obliged to dart out and run back to the end of the file to recover it. But she gave another swift glance of her blue eyes as she snatched it up and demurely ran back to her place. The procession passed on, but when Clarence reached the spot where she had paused he saw a three-cornered bit of paper lying in the grass. He was too discreet to pick it up while the girls were still in sight, but continued on, returning to it later. It contained a few words in a schoolgirl's hand, hastily scrawled in pencil: "Come to the south wall near the big pear-tree at six."

Delighted as Clarence felt, he was at the same time embarrassed. He could not understand the necessity of this mysterious rendezvous. He knew that if she was a scholar she was under certain conventual restraints; but with the privileges of his position and friendship with his teachers, he believed that Father Sobriente would easily procure him an interview with this old playfellow, of whom he had often spoken, and who was, with himself, the sole survivor of his tragical past. And trusted as he was by Sobriente, there was something in this clandestine though innocent rendezvous that went against his loyalty. Nevertheless, he kept the appointment, and at the stated time was at the south wall of the convent, over which the

gnarled boughs of the distinguishing pear-tree hung. Hard by in the wall was a grated wicket door that seemed unused.

Would she appear among the boughs or on the edge of the wall? Either would be like the old Susy. But to his surprise he heard the sound of a key turning in the lock. The grated door suddenly swung on its hinges, and Susy slipped out. Grasping his hand, she said, "Let 's run, Clarence," and before he could reply she started off with him at a rapid pace. Down the lane they flew — very much, as it seemed to Clarence's fancy, as they had flown from the old emigrant wagon on the prairie, four years before. He glanced at the fluttering, fairylike figure beside him. She had grown taller and more graceful; she was dressed in exquisite taste, with a minuteness of luxurious detail that bespoke the spoilt child; but there was the same prodigal outburst of rippling, golden hair down her back and shoulders, violet eyes, capricious little mouth, and the same delicate hands and feet he had remembered. He would have preferred a more deliberate survey, but with a shake of her head and an hysteric little laugh she only said, "Run, Clarence, run," and again darted forward. Arriving at the cross-street, they turned the corner, and halted breathlessly.

"But you 're not running away from school, Susy, are you?" said Clarence anxiously.

"Only a little bit. Just enough to get ahead of the other girls," she said, rearranging her golden curls and tilted hat. "You see, Clarence," she condescended to explain, with a sudden assumption of older superiority, "mother 's here at the hotel all this week, and I 'm allowed to go home every night, like a day scholar. Only there 's three or four other girls that go out at the same time with me, and one of the Sisters, and to-day I got ahead of 'em just to see you."

"But" — began Clarence.

"Oh, it 's all right; the other girls knew it, and helped me. They don't start out for half an hour yet, and they 'll say I 've just run ahead, and when they and the Sister get to the hotel I 'll be there already — don't you see?"

"Yes," said Clarence dubiously.

"And we 'll go to an ice-cream saloon now, sha'n't we? There 's a nice one near the hotel. I 've got some money," she added quickly, as Clarence looked embarrassed.

"So have I," said Clarence, with a faint accession of color. "Let 's go!" She had relinquished his hand to smooth out her frock, and they were walking side by side at a more moderate pace. "But," he continued, clinging to his first idea with masculine persistence, and anxious to assure his companion of his power, of his position, "I 'm in the college, and Father Sobriente, who knows your lady superior, is a good friend of mine and gives me privileges; and — and — when he knows that you and I used to play together — why, he 'll fix it that we may see each other whenever we want."

"Oh, you silly!" said Susy. "What! — when you 're" — "When I 'm *what?*"

The young girl shot a violet-blue ray from under her broad hat. "Why — when we 're grown up now?" Then with a certain precision, "Why, they 're *very* particular about young gentlemen! Why, Clarence, if they suspected that you and I were" — Another violet ray from under the hat completed this unfinished sentence.

Pleased and yet confused, Clarence looked straight ahead with deepening color. "Why," continued Susy, "Mary Rogers, that was walking with me, thought you were ever so old — and a distinguished Spaniard! And I," she said abruptly — "have n't I grown? Tell me, Clarence," with her old appealing impatience, "have n't I grown? Do tell me!"

"Very much," said Clarence.

"And is n't this frock pretty — it 's only my second best — but I 've a prettier one with lace all down in front; but is n't this one pretty, Clarence, tell me?"

Clarence thought the frock and its fair owner perfection, and said so. Whereat Susy, as if suddenly aware of the presence of passers-by, assumed an air of severe propriety, dropped her hands by her side, and with an affected conscientiousness walked on, a little further from Clarence's side, until they reached the ice-cream saloon.

"Get a table near the back, Clarence," she said in a confidential whisper, "where they can't see us — and strawberry, you know, for the lemon and vanilla here are just horrid!"

They took their seats in a kind of rustic arbor in the rear of the shop, which gave them the appearance of two youthful but somewhat over-dressed and over-conscious shepherds. There was an interval of slight awkwardness, which Susy endeavored to displace. "There has been," she remarked, with easy conversational lightness, "quite an excitement about our French teacher being changed. The girls in our class think it most disgraceful."

And this was all she could say after a separation of four years! Clarence was desperate, but as yet idealess and voiceless. At last, with an effort over his spoon, he gasped a floating recollection: "Do you still like flapjacks, Susy?"

"Oh yes," with a laugh, "but we don't have them now."

"And Mose" (a black pointer, who used to yelp when Susy sang), "does he still sing with you?"

"Oh, he 's been lost ever so long," said Susy composedly; "but I 've got a Newfoundland and a spaniel and a black pony," and here, with a rapid inventory of her other personal effects, she drifted into some desultory details of the devotion of her adopted parents, whom she

now readily spoke of as "papa" and "mamma," with evidently no disturbing recollection of the dead. From which it appeared that the Peytons were very rich, and, in addition to their possessions in the lower country, owned a ranch in Santa Clara and a house in San Francisco. Like all children, her strongest impressions were the most recent. In the vain hope to lead her back to this material yesterday, he said: —

"You remember Jim Hooker?"

"Oh, *he* ran away, when you left. But just think of it! The other day, when papa and I went into a big restaurant in San Francisco, who should be there waiting on the table — yes, Clarence, a real waiter — but Jim Hooker! Papa spoke to him; but of course," with a slight elevation of her pretty chin, "*I* could n't, you know; fancy — a waiter!"

The story of how Jim Hooker had personated him stopped short upon Clarence's lips. He could not bring himself now to add that revelation to the contempt of his small companion, which, in spite of its *naïveté*, somewhat grated on his sensibilities.

"Clarence," she said, suddenly turning towards him mysteriously, and indicating the shopman and his assistants, "I really believe these people suspect us."

"Of what?" said the practical Clarence.

"Don't be silly! Don't you see how they are staring?"

Clarence was really unable to detect the least curiosity on the part of the shopman, or that any one exhibited the slightest concern in him or his companion. But he felt a return of the embarrassed pleasure he was conscious of a moment before.

"Then you 're living with your father?" said Susy, changing the subject.

"You mean my *cousin*," said Clarence, smiling. "You know my father died long before I ever knew you."

"Yes; that 's what *you* used to say, Clarence, but papa says it is n't so." But seeing the boy's wondering eyes fixed on her with a troubled expression, she added quickly, "Oh, then, he *is* your cousin!"

"Well, I think I ought to know," said Clarence, with a smile, that was, however, far from comfortable, and a quick return of his old unpleasant recollections of the Peytons. "Why, I was brought to him by one of his friends." And Clarence gave a rapid boyish summary of his journey from Sacramento, and Flynn's discovery of the letter addressed to Silsbee. But before he had concluded he was conscious that Susy was by no means interested in these details, nor in the least affected by the passing allusion to her dead father and his relation to Clarence's misadventures. With her rounded chin in her hand, she was slowly examining his face, with a certain mischievous yet demure abstraction. "I tell you what, Clarence," she said, when he had finished, "you ought to make your cousin get you one of those sombreros, and a nice gold-braided serape. They 'd just suit you. And then — then you could ride up and down the Alameda when we are going by."

"But I 'm coming to see you at — at your house, and at the convent," he said eagerly. "Father Sobriente and my cousin will fix it all right."

But Susy shook her head, with superior wisdom. "No; they must never know our secret! — neither papa nor mamma, especially mamma. And they must n't know that we 've met again — *after these years!*" It is impossible to describe the deep significance which Susy's blue eyes gave to this expression. After a pause she went on: —

"No! We must never meet again, Clarence, unless Mary Rogers helps. She is my best, my *onliest* friend, and older than I; having had trouble herself, and being expressly forbidden to see him again. You can speak to

her about Suzette — that 's my name now; I was rechristened Suzette Alexandra Peyton by mamma. And now, Clarence," dropping her voice and glancing shyly around the saloon, "you may kiss me just once under my hat, for good-by." She adroitly slanted her broad-brimmed hat towards the front of the shop, and in its shadow advanced her fresh young cheek to Clarence.

Coloring and laughing, the boy pressed his lips to it twice. Then Susy arose, with the faintest affectation of a sigh, shook out her skirt, drew on her gloves with the greatest gravity, and saying, "Don't follow me further than the door — they 're coming now," walked with supercilious dignity past the preoccupied proprietor and waiters to the entrance. Here she said, with marked civility, "Good-afternoon, Mr. Brant," and tripped away towards the hotel. Clarence lingered for a moment to look after the lithe and elegant little figure, with its shining undulations of hair that fell over the back and shoulders of her white frock like a golden mantle, and then turned away in the opposite direction.

He walked home in a state, as it seemed to him, of absurd perplexity. There were many reasons why his encounter with Susy should have been of unmixed pleasure. She had remembered him of her own free will, and, in spite of the change in her fortune, had made the first advances. Her doubts about her future interviews had affected him but little; still less, I fear, did he think of the other changes in her character and disposition, for he was of that age when they added only a piquancy and fascination to her — as of one who, in spite of her weakness of nature, was still devoted to him! But he was painfully conscious that this meeting had revived in him all the fears, vague uneasiness, and sense of wrong that had haunted his first boyhood, and which he thought he had buried at El Refugio four years ago. Susy's allusion to

his father and the reiteration of Peyton's skepticism awoke in his older intellect the first feeling of suspicion that was compatible with his open nature. Was this recurring reticence and mystery due to any act of his father's? But, looking back upon it in after-years, he concluded that the incident of that day was a premonition rather than a recollection.

CHAPTER XI

When he reached the college the Angelus had long since rung. In the corridor he met one of the Fathers, who, instead of questioning him, returned his salutation with a grave gentleness that struck him. He had turned into Father Sobriente's quiet study with the intention of reporting himself, when he was disturbed to find him in consultation with three or four of the faculty, who seemed to be thrown into some slight confusion by his entrance. Clarence was about to retire hurriedly when Father Sobriente, breaking up the council with a significant glance at the others, called him back. Confused and embarrassed, with a dread of something impending, the boy tried to avert it by a hurried account of his meeting with Susy, and his hopes of Father Sobriente's counsel and assistance. Taking upon himself the idea of suggesting Susy's escapade, he confessed the fault. The old man gazed into his frank eyes with a thoughtful, half-compassionate smile. "I was just thinking of giving you a holiday with — with Don Juan Robinson." The unusual substitution of this final title for the habitual "your cousin" struck Clarence uneasily. "But we will speak of that later. Sit down, my son; I am not busy. We shall talk a little. Father Pedro says you are getting on fluently with your translations. That is excellent, my son, excellent."

Clarence's face beamed with relief and pleasure. His vague fears began to dissipate.

"And you translate even from dictation! Good! We have an hour to spare, and you shall give to me a speci-

men of your skill. Eh? Good! I will walk here and dictate to you in my poor English, and you shall sit there and render it to me in your good Spanish. Eh? So we shall amuse and instruct ourselves."

Clarence smiled. These sporadic moments of instruction and admonition were not unusual to the good Father. He cheerfully seated himself at the Padre's table before a blank sheet of paper, with a pen in his hand. Father Sobriente paced the apartment, with his usual heavy but noiseless tread. To his surprise, the good priest, after an exhaustive pinch of snuff, blew his nose, and began, in his most lugubrious style of pulpit exhortation: —

"It has been written that the sins of the father shall be visited upon the children, and the unthinking and worldly have sought refuge from this law by declaring it harsh and cruel. Miserable and blind! For do we not see that the wicked man, who in the pride of his power and vainglory is willing to risk punishment to himself, — and believes it to be courage, — must pause before the awful mandate that condemns an equal suffering to those he loves, which he cannot withhold or suffer for? In the spectacle of these innocents struggling against disgrace, perhaps disease, poverty, or desertion, what avails his haughty, all-defying spirit? Let us imagine, Clarence."

"Sir?" said the literal Clarence, pausing in his exercise.

"I mean," continued the priest, with a slight cough, "let the thoughtful man picture a father: a desperate, self-willed man, who scorned the laws of God and society — keeping only faith with a miserable subterfuge he called 'honor,' and relying only on his own courage and his knowledge of human weakness. Imagine him cruel and bloody — a gambler by profession, an outlaw among men, an outcast from the Church; voluntarily abandoning friends and family — the wife he should have cherished, the son

he should have reared and educated — for the gratification of his deadly passions. Yet imagine that man suddenly confronted with the thought of that heritage of shame and disgust which he had brought upon his innocent offspring — to whom he cannot give even his own desperate recklessness to sustain its vicarious suffering. What must be the feelings of a parent" —

"Father Sobriente," said Clarence softly.

To the boy's surprise, scarcely had he spoken when the soft protecting palm of the priest was already upon his shoulder, and the snuffy but kindly upper lip, trembling with some strange emotion, close beside his cheek.

"What is it, Clarence?" he said hurriedly. "Speak, my son, without fear! You would ask" —

"I only wanted to know if 'padre' takes a masculine verb here," replied Clarence naïvely.

Father Sobriente blew his nose violently. "Truly — though used for either gender, by the context masculine," he responded gravely. "Ah," he added, leaning over Clarence, and scanning his work hastily, "Good, very good! And now, possibly," he continued, passing his hand like a damp sponge over his heated brow, "we shall reverse our exercise. I shall deliver to you in Spanish what you shall render back in English, eh? And — let us consider — we shall make something more familiar and narrative, eh?"

To this Clarence, somewhat bored by these present solemn abstractions, assented gladly, and took up his pen. Father Sobriente, resuming his noiseless pacing, began: —

"On the fertile plains of Guadalajara lived a certain caballero, possessed of flocks and lands, and a wife and son. But, being also possessed of a fiery and roving nature, he did not value them as he did perilous adventure, feats of arms, and sanguinary encounters. To this may be added riotous excesses, gambling and drunkenness,

which in time decreased his patrimony, even as his rebellious and quarrelsome spirit had alienated his family and neighbors. His wife, borne down by shame and sorrow, died while her son was still an infant. In a fit of equal remorse and recklessness the caballero married again within the year. But the new wife was of a temper and bearing as bitter as her consort. Violent quarrels ensued between them, ending in the husband abandoning his wife and son, and leaving St. Louis — I should say Guadalajara — forever. Joining some adventurers in a foreign land, under an assumed name, he pursued his reckless course, until, by one or two acts of outlawry, he made his return to civilization impossible. The deserted wife and stepmother of his child coldly accepted the situation, forbidding his name to be spoken again in her presence, announced that he was dead, and kept the knowledge of his existence from his own son, whom she placed under the charge of her sister. But the sister managed to secretly communicate with the outlawed father, and, under a pretext, arranged between them, of sending the boy to another relation, actually dispatched the innocent child to his unworthy parent. Perhaps stirred by remorse, the infamous man" —

"Stop!" said Clarence suddenly.

He had thrown down his pen, and was standing erect and rigid before the Father.

"You are trying to tell me something, Father Sobriente," he said, with an effort. "Speak out, I implore you. I can stand anything but this mystery. I am no longer a child. I have a right to know all. This that you are telling me is no fable — I see it in your face, Father Sobriente; it is the story of — of" —

"Your father, Clarence," said the priest in a trembling voice.

The boy drew back, with a white face. "My father!" he repeated. "Living, or dead?"

"Living, when you first left your home," said the old man hurriedly, seizing Clarence's hand, "for it was he who in the name of your cousin sent for you. Living — yes, while you were here, for it was he who for the past three years stood in the shadow of this assumed cousin, Don Juan, and at last sent you to this school. Living, Clarence, yes; but living under a name and reputation that would have blasted you! And now *dead* — dead in Mexico, shot as an insurgent and in a still desperate career! May God have mercy on his soul!"

"Dead!" repeated Clarence, trembling, "only now?"

"The news of the insurrection and his fate came only an hour since," continued the Padre quickly; "his complicity with it and his identity were known only to Don Juan. He would have spared you any knowledge of the truth, even as this dead man would; but I and my brothers thought otherwise. I have broken it to you badly, my son, but forgive me!"

An hysterical laugh broke from Clarence, and the priest recoiled before him. "Forgive *you!* What was this man to me?" he said, with boyish vehemence. "He never *loved* me! He deserted me; he made my life a lie. He never sought me, came near me, or stretched a hand to me that I could take!"

"Hush! hush!" said the priest, with a horrified look, laying his huge hand upon the boy's shoulder and bearing him down to his seat. "You know not what you say. Think — think, Clarence! Was there none of all those who have befriended you — who were kind to you in your wanderings — to whom your heart turned unconsciously? Think, Clarence! You yourself have spoken to me of such a one. Let your heart speak again, for his sake — for the sake of the dead."

A gentler light suffused the boy's eyes, and he started. Catching convulsively at his companion's sleeve, he said in

an eager, boyish whisper, "There was one, a wicked, desperate man, whom they all feared — Flynn, who brought me from the mines. Yes, I thought that he was my cousin's loyal friend — more than all the rest; and I told him everything — all, that I never told the man I thought my cousin, or any one, or even you; and I think, I think, Father, I liked him best of all. I thought since it was wrong," he continued, with a trembling smile, "for I was foolishly fond even of the way the others feared him, he that I feared not, and who was so kind to me. Yet he, too, left me without a word, and when I would have followed him" — But the boy broke down, and buried his face in his hands.

"No, no," said Father Sobriente, with eager persistence, "that was his foolish pride to spare you the knowledge of your kinship with one so feared, and part of the blind and mistaken penance he had laid upon himself. For even at that moment of your boyish indignation, he never was so fond of you as then. Yes, my poor boy, this man, to whom God led your wandering feet at Deadman's Gulch; the man who brought you here, and by some secret hold — I know not what — on Don Juan's past, persuaded him to assume to be your relation; this man Flynn, this Jackson Brant the gambler, this Hamilton Brant the outlaw — *was your father!* Ah, yes! Weep on, my son; each tear of love and forgiveness from thee hath vicarious power to wash away his sin."

With a single sweep of his protecting hand he drew Clarence towards his breast, until the boy slowly sank upon his knees at his feet. Then, lifting his eyes towards the ceiling, he said softly in an older tongue, "And *thou*, too, unhappy and perturbed spirit, rest!"

. . . . . .

It was nearly dawn when the good Padre wiped the last tears from Clarence's clearer eyes. "And now, my

son," he said, with a gentle smile, as he rose to his feet, "let us not forget the living. Although your stepmother has, through her own act, no legal claim upon you, far be it from me to indicate your attitude towards her. Enough that you are independent." He turned, and, opening a drawer in his secretary, took out a bank-book, and placed it in the hands of the wondering boy.

"It was his wish, Clarence, that even after his death you should never have to prove your kinship to claim your rights. Taking advantage of the boyish deposit you had left with Mr. Carden at the bank, with his connivance and in your name he added to it, month by month and year by year; Mr. Carden cheerfully accepting the trust and management of the fund. The seed thus sown has produced a thousandfold, Clarence, beyond all expectations. You are not only free, my son, but of yourself and in whatever name you choose — your own master."

"I shall keep my father's name," said the boy simply.

"Amen!" said Father Sobriente.

Here closes the chronicle of Clarence Brant's boyhood. How he sustained his name and independence in after-years, and who, of those already mentioned in these pages, helped him to make or mar it, may be a matter for future record.

SUSY: A STORY OF THE PLAINS

CHAPTER I

WHERE the San Leandro turnpike stretches its dusty, hot, and interminable length along the valley, at a point where the heat and dust have become intolerable, the monotonous expanse of wild oats on either side illimitable, and the distant horizon apparently remoter than ever, it suddenly slips between a stunted thicket or hedge of scrub oaks, which until that moment had been undistinguishable above the long, misty, quivering level of the grain. The thicket rising gradually in height, but with a regular slope whose gradient had been determined by centuries of western trade-winds, presently becomes a fair wood of live-oak, and a few hundred yards further at last assumes the aspect of a primeval forest. A delicious coolness fills the air; the long, shadowy aisles greet the aching eye with a soothing twilight; the murmur of unseen brooks is heard, and, by a strange irony, the enormous, widely spaced stacks of wild oats are replaced by a carpet of tiny-leaved mosses and chickweed at the roots of trees, and the minutest clover in more open spaces. The baked and cracked adobe soil of the now vanished plains is exchanged for a heavy red mineral dust and gravel, rocks and boulders make their appearance, and at times the road is crossed by the white veins of quartz. It is still the San Leandro turnpike, — a few miles later to rise from this cañada into the upper plains again, — but it is also the actual gateway and avenue to the Robles Rancho. When the departing

visitors of Judge Peyton, now owner of the rancho, reach the outer plains again, after twenty minutes' drive from the house, the cañada, rancho, and avenue have as completely disappeared from view as if they had been swallowed up in the plain.

A cross-road from the turnpike is the usual approach to the casa or mansion, — a long, low quadrangle of brown adobe wall in a bare but gently sloping eminence. And here a second surprise meets the stranger. He seems to have emerged from the forest upon another illimitable plain, but one utterly trackless, wild, and desolate. It is, however, only a lower terrace of the same valley, and, in fact, comprises the three square leagues of the Robles Rancho. Uncultivated and savage as it appears, given over to wild cattle and horses that sometimes sweep in frightened bands around the very casa itself, the long south wall of the corral embraces an orchard of gnarled pear-trees, an old vineyard, and a venerable garden of olives and oranges. A manor, formerly granted by Charles V. to Don Vincente Robles, of Andalusia, of pious and ascetic memory, it had commended itself to Judge Peyton, of Kentucky, a modern heretic pioneer of bookish tastes and secluded habits, who had bought it of Don Vincente's descendants. Here Judge Peyton seemed to have realized his idea of a perfect climate, and a retirement, half studious, half active, with something of the seignioralty of the old slaveholder that he had been. Here, too, he had seen the hope of restoring his wife's health — for which he had undertaken the overland emigration — more than fulfilled in Mrs. Peyton's improved physical condition, albeit at the expense, perhaps, of some of the languorous graces of ailing American wifehood.

It was with a curious recognition of this latter fact that Judge Peyton watched his wife crossing the patio or courtyard with her arm around the neck of her adopted daugh-

ter "Suzette." A sudden memory crossed his mind of the first day that he had seen them together, — the day that he had brought the child and her boy-companion — two estrays from an emigrant train on the plains — to his wife in camp. Certainly Mrs. Peyton was stouter and stronger fibred; the wonderful Californian climate had materialized her figure, as it had their Eastern fruits and flowers, but it was stranger that "Susy" — the child of homelier frontier blood and parentage, whose wholesome peasant plumpness had at first attracted them — should have grown thinner and more graceful, and even seemed to have gained the delicacy his wife had lost. Six years had imperceptibly wrought this change; it had never struck him before so forcibly as on this day of Susy's return from the convent school at Santa Clara for the holidays.

The woman and child had reached the broad veranda which, on one side of the patio, replaced the old Spanish corridor. It was the single modern innovation that Peyton had allowed himself when he had broken the quadrangular symmetry of the old house with a wooden annex or addition beyond the walls. It made a pleasant lounging-place, shadowed from the hot midday sun by sloping roofs and awnings, and sheltered from the boisterous afternoon trade-winds by the opposite side of the court. But Susy did not seem inclined to linger there long that morning, in spite of Mrs. Peyton's evident desire for a maternal *tête-à-tête*. The nervous preoccupation and capricious ennui of an indulged child showed in her pretty but discontented face, and knit her curved eyebrows, and Peyton saw a look of pain pass over his wife's face as the young girl suddenly and half laughingly broke away and fluttered off towards the old garden.

Mrs. Peyton looked up and caught her husband's eye.

"I am afraid Susy finds it more dull here every time she returns," she said, with an apologetic smile. "I am

glad she has invited one of her school friends to come for a visit to-morrow. You know, yourself, John," she added, with a slight partisan attitude, "that the lonely old house and wild plain are not particularly lively for young people, however much they may suit your ways."

"It certainly must be dull if she can't stand it for three weeks in the year," said her husband dryly. "But we really cannot open the San Francisco house for her summer vacation, nor can we move from the rancho to a more fashionable locality. Besides, it will do her good to run wild here. I can remember when she was n't so fastidious. In fact, I was thinking just now how changed she was from the day when we picked her up" —

"How often am I to remind you, John," interrupted the lady, with some impatience, "that we agreed never to speak of her past, or even to think of her as anything but our own child. You know how it pains me! And the poor dear herself has forgotten it, and thinks of us only as her own parents. I really believe that if that wretched father and mother of hers had not been killed by the Indians, or were to come to life again, she would neither know them nor care for them. I mean, of course, John," she said, averting her eyes from a slightly cynical smile on her husband's face, "that it 's only natural for young children to be forgetful, and ready to take new impressions."

"And as long, dear, as *we* are not the subjects of this youthful forgetfulness, and she is n't really finding *us* as stupid as the rancho," replied her husband cheerfully, "I suppose we must n't complain."

"John, how can you talk such nonsense?" said Mrs. Peyton impatiently. "But I have no fear of that," she added, with a slightly ostentatious confidence. "I only wish I was as sure" —

"Of what?"

"Of nothing happening that could take her from us.

I do not mean death, John, — like our first little one. That does not happen to one twice; but I sometimes dread" —

"What? She 's only fifteen, and it 's rather early to think about the only other inevitable separation, — marriage. Come, Ally, this is mere fancy. She has been given up to us by her family, — at least, by all that we know are left of them. I have legally adopted her. If I have not made her my heiress, it is because I prefer to leave everything to *you*, and I would rather she should know that she was dependent upon you for the future than upon me."

"And I can make a will in her favor if I want to?" said Mrs. Peyton quickly.

"Always," responded her husband smilingly; "but you have ample time to think of that, I trust. Meanwhile I have some news for you which may make Susy's visit to the rancho this time less dull to her. You remember Clarence Brant, the boy who was with her when we picked her up, and who really saved her life?"

"No, I don't," said Mrs. Peyton pettishly, "nor do I want to! You know, John, how distasteful and unpleasant it is for me to have those dreary, petty, and vulgar details of the poor child's past life recalled, and, thank Heaven, I have forgotten them except when you choose to drag them before me. You agreed, long ago, that we were never to talk of the Indian massacre of her parents, so that we could also ignore it before her; then why do you talk of her vulgar friends, who are just as unpleasant? Please let us drop the past."

"Willingly, my dear; but, unfortunately, we cannot make others do it. And this is a case in point. It appears that this boy, whom we brought to Sacramento to deliver to a relative" —

"And who was a wicked little impostor, — you remem-

ber that yourself, John, for he said that he was the son of Colonel Brant, and that he was dead; and you know, and my brother Harry knew, that Colonel Brant was alive all the time, and that he was lying, and Colonel Brant was not his father," broke in Mrs. Peyton impatiently.

"As it seems you do remember that much," said Peyton dryly, "it is only just to him that I should tell you that it appears that he was not an impostor. His story was *true*. I have just learned that Colonel Brant *was* actually his father, but had concealed his lawless life here, as well as his identity, from the boy. He was really that vague relative to whom Clarence was confided, and under that disguise he afterwards protected the boy, had him carefully educated at the Jesuits' College of San José, and, dying two years ago in that filibuster raid in Mexico, left him a considerable fortune."

"And what has he to do with Susy's holidays?" said Mrs. Peyton, with uneasy quickness. "John, you surely cannot expect her ever to meet this common creature again, with his vulgar ways. His wretched associates like that Jim Hooker, and, as you yourself admit, the blood of an assassin, duelist — and Heaven knows what kind of a pirate his father was n't at the last — in his veins! You don't believe that a lad of this type, however much of his father's ill-gotten money he may have, can be fit company for your daughter? You never could have thought of inviting him here?"

"I 'm afraid that 's exactly what I have done, Ally," said the smiling but unmoved Peyton; "but I 'm still more afraid that your conception of his present condition is an unfair one, like your remembrance of his past. Father Sobriente, whom I met at San José yesterday, says he is very intelligent, and thoroughly educated, with charming manners and refined tastes. His father's money, which they say was an investment for him in Carden's

Bank five years ago, is as good as any one's, and his father's blood won't hurt him in California or the Southwest. At least, he is received everywhere, and Don Juan Robinson was his guardian. Indeed, as far as social status goes, it might be a serious question if the actual daughter of the late John Silsbee, of Pike County, and the adopted child of John Peyton was in the least his superior. As Father Sobriente evidently knew of Clarence's former companionship with Susy and her parents, it would be hardly politic for us to ignore it or seem to be ashamed of it. So I entrusted Sobriente with an invitation to young Brant on the spot."

Mrs. Peyton's impatience, indignation, and opposition, which had successively given way before her husband's quiet, masterful good humor, here took the form of a neurotic fatalism. She shook her head with superstitious resignation.

"Did n't I tell you, John, that I always had a dread of something coming" —

"But if it comes in the shape of a shy young lad, I see nothing singularly portentous in it. They have not met since they were quite small; their tastes have changed; if they don't quarrel and fight they may be equally bored with each other. Yet until then, in one way or another, Clarence will occupy the young lady's vacant caprice, and her school friend, Mary Rogers, will be here, you know, to divide his attentions, and," added Peyton, with mock solemnity, "preserve the interest of strict propriety. Shall I break it to her, — or will you?"

"No, — yes," hesitated Mrs. Peyton; "perhaps I had better."

"Very well, I leave his character in your hands; only don't prejudice her into a romantic fancy for him." And Judge Peyton lounged smilingly away.

Then two little tears forced themselves from Mrs. Pey-

ton's eyes. Again she saw that prospect of uninterrupted companionship with Susy, upon which each successive year she had built so many maternal hopes and confidences, fade away before her. She dreaded the coming of Susy's school friend, who shared her daughter's present thoughts and intimacy, although she had herself invited her in a more desperate dread of the child's abstracted, discontented eyes; she dreaded the advent of the boy who had shared Susy's early life before she knew her; she dreaded the ordeal of breaking the news and perhaps seeing that pretty animation spring into her eyes, which she had begun to believe no solicitude or tenderness of her own ever again awakened, — and yet she dreaded still more that her husband should see it too. For the love of this re-created woman, although not entirely materialized with her changed fibre, had nevertheless become a coarser selfishness fostered by her loneliness and limited experience. The maternal yearning left unsatisfied by the loss of her first-born had never been filled by Susy's thoughtless acceptance of it; she had been led astray by the child's easy transference of dependence and the forgetfulness of youth, and was only now dimly conscious of finding herself face to face with an alien nature.

She started to her feet and followed the direction that Susy had taken. For a moment she had to front the afternoon trade-wind which chilled her as it swept the plain beyond the gateway, but was stopped by the adobe wall, above whose shelter the stunted treetops — through years of exposure — slanted as if trimmed by gigantic shears. At first, looking down the venerable alley of fantastic, knotted shapes, she saw no trace of Susy. But halfway down the gleam of a white skirt against a thicket of dark olives showed her the young girl sitting on a bench in a neglected arbor. In the midst of this formal and faded pageantry she looked charmingly fresh, youthful, and

pretty; and yet the unfortunate woman thought that her attitude and expression at that moment suggested more than her fifteen years of girlhood. Her golden hair still hung unfettered over her straight, boylike back and shoulders; her short skirt still showed her childish feet and ankles; yet there seemed to be some undefined maturity or a vague womanliness about her that stung Mrs. Peyton's heart. The child was growing away from her, too!

"Susy!"

The young girl raised her head quickly; her deep violet eyes seemed also to leap with a sudden suspicion, and with a half-mechanical, secretive movement, that might have been only a schoolgirl's instinct, her right hand had slipped a paper on which she was scribbling between the leaves of her book. Yet the next moment, even while looking interrogatively at her mother, she withdrew the paper quietly, tore it up into small pieces, and threw them on the ground.

But Mrs. Peyton was too preoccupied with her news to notice the circumstance, and too nervous in her haste to be tactful. "Susy, your father has invited that boy, Clarence Brant, — you know that creature we picked up and assisted on the plains, when you were a mere baby, — to come down here and make us a visit."

Her heart seemed to stop beating as she gazed breathlessly at the girl. But Susy's face, unchanged except for the alert, questioning eyes, remained fixed for a moment; then a childish smile of wonder opened her small red mouth, expanded it slightly as she said simply: —

"Lor, mar! He has n't, really!"

Inexpressibly, yet unreasonably reassured, Mrs. Peyton hurriedly recounted her husband's story of Clarence's fortune, and was even joyfully surprised into some fairness of statement.

"But you don't remember him much, do you, dear?

It was so long ago, and — you are quite a young lady now," she added eagerly.

The open mouth was still fixed; the wondering smile would have been idiotic in any face less dimpled, rosy, and piquant than Susy's. After a slight gasp, as if in still incredulous and partly reminiscent preoccupation, she said without replying: —

"How funny! When is he coming?"

"Day after to-morrow," returned Mrs. Peyton, with a contented smile.

"And Mary Rogers will be here, too. It will be real fun for her."

Mrs. Peyton was more than reassured. Half ashamed of her jealous fears, she drew Susy's golden head towards her and kissed it. And the young girl, still reminiscent, with smilingly abstracted toleration, returned the caress.

CHAPTER II

It was not thought inconsistent with Susy's capriciousness that she should declare her intention the next morning of driving her pony buggy to Santa Inez to anticipate the stagecoach and fetch Mary Rogers from the station. Mrs. Peyton, as usual, supported the young lady's whim and opposed her husband's objections.

"Because the stagecoach happens to pass our gate, John, it is no reason why Susy should n't drive her friend from Santa Inez if she prefers it. It 's only seven miles, and you can send Pedro to follow her on horseback to see that she comes to no harm."

"But that is n't Pedro's business," said Peyton.

"He ought to be proud of the privilege," returned the lady, with a toss of her head.

Peyton smiled grimly, but yielded; and when the stagecoach drew up the next afternoon at the Santa Inez Hotel, Susy was already waiting in her pony carriage before it. Although the susceptible driver, expressman, and passengers generally, charmed with this golden-haired vision, would have gladly protracted the meeting of the two young friends, the transfer of Mary Rogers from the coach to the carriage was effected with considerable hauteur and youthful dignity by Susy. Even Mary Rogers, two years Susy's senior, a serious brunette, whose good humor did not, however, impair her capacity for sentiment, was impressed and even embarrassed by her demeanor; but only for a moment. When they had driven from the hotel and were fairly hidden again in the dust of the outlying plain, with

the discreet Pedro hovering in the distance, Susy dropped the reins, and, grasping her companion's arm, gasped, in tones of dramatic intensity: —

"He 's been heard from, and is coming *here!*"

"Who?"

A sickening sense that her old confidante had already lost touch with her — they had been separated for nearly two weeks — might have passed through Susy's mind.

"Who?" she repeated, with a vicious shake of Mary's arm, "why, Clarence Brant, of course."

"No!" said Mary vaguely.

Nevertheless, Susy went on rapidly, as if to neutralize the effect of her comrade's vacuity.

"You never could have imagined it! Never! Even *I*, when mother told me, I thought I should have fainted, and *all* would have been revealed!"

"But," hesitated the still wondering confidante, "I thought that was all over long ago. You have n't seen him nor heard from him since that day you met accidentally at Santa Clara, two years ago, have you?"

Susy's eyes shot a blue ray of dark but unutterable significance into Mary's, and then were carefully averted. Mary Rogers, although perfectly satisfied that Susy had never seen Clarence since, nevertheless instantly accepted and was even thrilled with this artful suggestion of a clandestine correspondence. Such was the simple faith of youthful friendship.

"Mother knows nothing of it, of course, and a word from you or him would ruin everything," continued the breathless Susy. "That 's why I came to fetch you and warn you. You must see him first, and warn him at any cost. If I had n't run every risk to come here to-day, Heaven knows what might have happened! What do you think of the ponies, dear? They 're my own, and the sweetest! This one 's Susy, that one Clarence, — but pri-

vately, you know. Before the world and in the stables he 's only Birdie."

"But I thought you wrote to me that you called them 'Paul and Virginia,' " said Mary doubtfully.

"I do, sometimes," said Susy calmly. "But one has to learn to suppress one's feelings, dear!" Then quickly, "I do so hate deceit, don't you? Tell me, don't you think deceit perfectly hateful?"

Without waiting for her friend's loyal assent, she continued rapidly: "And he 's just rolling in wealth! and educated, papa says, to the highest degree!"

"Then," began Mary, "if he 's coming with your mother's consent, and if you have n't quarreled, and it is not broken off, I should think you 'd be just delighted."

But another quick flash from Susy's eyes dispersed these beatific visions of the future. "Hush!" she said, with suppressed dramatic intensity. "You know not what you say! There 's an awful mystery hangs over him. Mary Rogers," continued the young girl, approaching her small mouth to her confidante's ear in an appalling whisper. "His father was — a *pirate!* Yes — lived a pirate and was killed a pirate!"

The statement, however, seemed to be partly ineffective. Mary Rogers was startled but not alarmed, and even protested feebly. "But," she said, "if the father 's dead, what 's that to do with Clarence? He was always with your papa — so you told me, dear — or other people, and could n't catch anything from his own father. And I 'm sure, dearest, he always seemed nice and quiet."

"Yes, *seemed*," returned Susy darkly, "but that 's all you know! It was in his blood. You know it always is, — you read it in the books, — you could see it in his eye. There were times, my dear, when he was thwarted, — when the slightest attention from another person to me revealed it! I have kept it to myself, — but think, dear

est, of the effects of jealousy on that passionate nature! Sometimes I tremble to look back upon it."

Nevertheless, she raised her hands and threw back her lovely golden mane from her childish shoulders with an easy, untroubled gesture. It was singular that Mary Rogers, leaning back comfortably in the buggy, also accepted these heart-rending revelations with comfortably knitted brows and luxuriously contented concern. If she found it difficult to recognize in the picture just drawn by Susy the quiet, gentle, and sadly reserved youth she had known, she said nothing. After a silence, lazily watching the distant wheeling vaquero, she said: —

"And your father always sends an outrider like that with you? How nice! So picturesque — and like the old Spanish days."

"Hush!" said Susy, with another unutterable glance.

But this time Mary was in full sympathetic communion with her friend, and equal to any incoherent hiatus of revelation.

"No!" she said promptly, "you don't mean it!"

"Don't ask me. I dare n't say anything to papa, for he 'd be simply furious. But there are times when we 're alone, and Pedro wheels down so near with *such* a look in his black eyes, that I 'm all in a tremble. It 's dreadful! They say he 's a real Briones, — and he sometimes says something in Spanish, ending with 'señorita,' but I pretend I don't understand."

"And I suppose that if anything should happen to the ponies, he 'd just risk his life to save you."

"Yes, — and it would be so awful, — for I just hate him!"

"But if *I* was with you, dear, he could n't expect you to be as grateful as if you were alone. Susy!" she continued after a pause, "if you just stirred up the ponies a little so as to make 'em go fast, perhaps he might think

they 'd got away from you, and come dashing down here. It would be so funny to see him, — would n't it?"

The two girls looked at each other; their eyes sparkled already with a fearful joy, — they drew a long breath of guilty anticipation. For a moment Susy even believed in her imaginary sketch of Pedro's devotion.

"Papa said I was n't to use the whip except in a case of necessity," she said, reaching for the slender silver-handled toy, and setting her pretty lips together with the added determination of disobedience. "G'long!" — and she laid the lash smartly on the shining backs of the animals.

They were wiry, slender brutes of Mojave Indian blood, only lately broken to harness, and still undisciplined in temper. The lash sent them rearing into the air, where, forgetting themselves in the slackened traces and loose reins, they came down with a succession of bounds that brought the light buggy leaping after them with its wheels scarcely touching the ground. That unlucky lash had knocked away the bonds of a few months' servitude and sent the half-broken brutes instinctively careering with arched backs and kicking heels into the field towards the nearest cover.

Mary Rogers cast a hurried glance over her shoulder. Alas, they had not calculated on the insidious levels of the terraced plain, and the faithful Pedro had suddenly disappeared; the intervention of six inches of rising wild oats had wiped him out of the prospect and their possible salvation as completely as if he had been miles away. Nevertheless, the girls were not frightened; perhaps they had not time. There was, however, the briefest interval for the most dominant of feminine emotions, and it was taken advantage of by Susy.

"It was all *your* fault, dear!" she gasped, as the fore-wheels of the buggy, dropping into a gopher rut, suddenly

tilted up the back of the vehicle and shot its fair occupants into the yielding palisades of dusty grain. The shock detached the whiffletree from the splinter-bar, snapped the light pole, and, turning the now thoroughly frightened animals again from their course, sent them, goaded by the clattering fragments, flying down the turnpike. Half a mile farther on they overtook the gleaming white canvas hood of a slowly moving wagon drawn by two oxen, and, swerving again, the nearer pony stepped upon a trailing trace and ingloriously ended their career by rolling himself and his companion in the dust at the very feet of the peacefully plodding team.

Equally harmless and inglorious was the catastrophe of Susy and her friend. The strong, elastic stalks of the tall grain broke their fall and enabled them to scramble to their feet, dusty, disheveled, but unhurt, and even unstunned by the shock. Their first instinctive cries over a damaged hat or ripped skirt were followed by the quick reaction of childish laughter. They were alone; the very defection of Pedro consoled them, in its absence of any witness to their disaster; even their previous slight attitude to each other was forgotten. They groped their way, pushing and panting, to the road again, where, beholding the overset buggy with its wheels ludicrously in the air, they suddenly seized and shook each other, and in an outburst of hilarious ecstasy, fairly laughed until the tears came into their eyes.

Then there was a breathless silence.

"The stage will be coming by in a moment," composedly said Susy. "Fix me, dear."

Mary Rogers calmly walked around her friend, bestowing a practical shake there, a pluck here, completely retying one bow and restoring an engaging fullness to another, yet critically examining, with her head on one side, the fascinating result. Then Susy performed the same func-

tion for Mary with equal deliberation and deftness. Suddenly Mary started and looked up.

"It 's coming," she said quickly, "and they 've seen us."

The expression of the faces of the two girls instantly changed. A pained dignity and resignation, apparently born of the most harrowing experiences and controlled only by perfect good breeding, was distinctly suggested in their features and attitude as they stood patiently by the wreck of their overturned buggy awaiting the oncoming coach. In sharp contrast was the evident excitement among the passengers. A few rose from their seats in their eagerness; as the stage pulled up in the road beside the buggy four or five of the younger men leaped to the ground.

"Are you hurt, miss?" they gasped sympathetically.

Susy did not immediately reply, but ominously knitted her pretty eyebrows as if repressing a spasm of pain. Then she said, "Not at all," coldly, with the suggestion of stoically concealing some lasting or perhaps fatal injury, and took the arm of Mary Rogers, who had, in the mean time, established a touching yet graceful limp.

Declining the proffered assistance of the passengers, they helped each other into the coach, and freezingly requesting the driver to stop at Mr. Peyton's gate, maintained a statuesque and impressive silence. At the gates they got down, followed by the sympathetic glances of the others.

To all appearance their escapade, albeit fraught with dangerous possibilities, had happily ended. But in the economy of human affairs, as in nature, forces are not suddenly let loose without more or less sympathetic disturbance which is apt to linger after the impelling cause is harmlessly spent. The fright which the girls had unsuccessfully attempted to produce in the heart of their escort had passed him to become a panic elsewhere. Judge Peyton,

riding near the gateway of his rancho, was suddenly confronted by the spectacle of one of his vaqueros driving on before him the two lassoed and dusty ponies, with a face that broke into violent gesticulating at his master's quick interrogation.

"Ah! Mother of God! It was an evil day! For the bronchos had run away, upset the buggy, and had only been stopped by a brave Americano of an ox-team, whose lasso was even now around their necks, to prove it, and who had been dragged a matter of a hundred varas, like a calf, at their heels. The señoritas, — ah! had he not already said they were safe, by the mercy of Jesus! — picked up by the coach, and would be here at this moment."

"But where was Pedro all the time? What was he doing?" demanded Peyton, with a darkened face and gathering anger.

The vaquero looked at his master, and shrugged his shoulders significantly. At any other time Peyton would have remembered that Pedro, as the reputed scion of a decayed Spanish family, and claiming superiority, was not a favorite with his fellow retainers. But the gesture, half of suggestion, half of depreciation, irritated Peyton still more.

"Well, where is this American who *did* something when there was n't a man among you all able to stop a child's runaway ponies?" he said sarcastically. "Let me see him."

The vaquero became still more deprecatory.

"Ah! He had driven on with his team towards San Antonio. He would not stop to be thanked. But that was the whole truth. He, Incarnacion, could swear to it as to the Creed. There was nothing more."

"Take those beasts around the back way to the corral," said Peyton, thoroughly enraged, "and not a word of this

to any one at the casa, do you hear? Not a word to Mrs. Peyton or the servants, or, by Heaven, I 'll clear the rancho of the whole lazy crew of you at once. Out of the way there, and be off!"

He spurred his horse past the frightened menial, and dashed down the narrow lane that led to the gate. But, as Incarnacion had truly said, "It was an evil day," for at the bottom of the lane, ambling slowly along as he lazily puffed a yellow cigarette, appeared the figure of the erring Pedro. Utterly unconscious of the accident, attributing the disappearance of his charges to the inequalities of the plain, and, in truth, little interested in what he firmly believed was his purely artificial function, he had even made a larger circuit to stop at a wayside fonda for refreshments.

Unfortunately, there is no more illogical sequence of human emotion than the exasperation produced by the bland manner of the unfortunate object who has excited it, although that very unconcern may be the convincing proof of innocence of intention. Judge Peyton, already influenced, was furious at the comfortable oblivousness of his careless henchman, and rode angrily towards him. Only a quick turn of Pedro's wrist kept the two men from coming into collision.

"Is this the way you attend to your duty?" demanded Peyton in a thick, suppressed voice. "Where is the buggy? Where is my daughter?"

There was no mistaking Judge Peyton's manner, even if the reason of it was not so clear to Pedro's mind, and his hot Latin blood flew instinctively to his face. But for that, he might have shown some concern or asked an explanation. As it was, he at once retorted with the national shrug and the national half-scornful, half-lazy "Quien sabe?"

"Who knows?" repeated Peyton hotly. "*I* do! She was thrown out of her buggy through your negligence and

infernal laziness! The ponies ran away, and were stopped by a stranger who was n't afraid of risking his bones, while *you* were limping around somewhere like a slouching, cowardly coyote."

The vaquero struggled a moment between blank astonishment and inarticulate rage. At last he burst out: —

"I am no coyote! I was there! I saw no runaway!"

"Don't lie to me, sir!" roared Peyton. "I tell you the buggy was smashed, the girls were thrown out and nearly killed" — He stopped suddenly. The sound of youthful laughter had come from the bottom of the lane, where Susy Peyton and Mary Rogers, just alighted from the coach, in the reaction of their previous constrained attitude, were flying hilariously into view. A slight embarrassment crossed Peyton's face; a still deeper flush of anger overspread Pedro's sullen cheek.

Then Pedro found tongue again, his native one, rapidly, violently, half incoherently. "Ah, yes! It had come to this. It seems he was not a vaquero, a companion of the padrone on land that had been his own before the Americanos robbed him of it, but a servant, a lackey of muchachas, an attendant on children to amuse them, or — why not? — an appendage to his daughter's state! Ah, Jesus Maria! such a state! such a muchacha! A picked-up foundling — a swineherd's daughter — to be ennobled by his, Pedro's, attendance, and for whose vulgar, clownish tricks, — tricks of a swineherd's daughter, — he, Pedro, was to be brought to book and insulted as if she were of Hidalgo blood! Ah, Caramba! Don Juan Peyton would find he could no more make a servant of him than he could make a lady of her!"

The two young girls were rapidly approaching. Judge Peyton spurred his horse beside the vaquero's, and, swinging the long thong of his bridle ominously in his clenched fingers, said, with a white face: —

"*Vamos!*"

Pedro's hand slid towards his sash. Peyton only looked at him with a rigid smile of scorn.

"Or I'll lash you here before them both," he added in a lower voice.

The vaquero met Peyton's relentless eyes with a yellow flash of hate, drew his reins sharply, until his mustang, galled by the cruel bit, reared suddenly as if to strike at the immovable American, then, apparently with the same action, he swung it around on its hind legs, as on a pivot, and dashed towards the corral at a furious gallop.

CHAPTER III

MEANTIME the heroic proprietor of the peaceful ox-team, whose valor Incarnacion had so infelicitously celebrated, was walking listlessly in the dust beside his wagon. At a first glance his slouching figure, taken in connection with his bucolic conveyance, did not immediately suggest a hero. As he emerged from the dusty cloud it could be seen that he was wearing a belt from which a large dragoon revolver and hunting-knife were slung, and placed somewhat ostentatiously across the wagon seat was a rifle. Yet the other contents of the wagon were of a singularly inoffensive character, and even suggested articles of homely barter. Culinary utensils of all sizes, tubs, scullery brushes, and clocks, with several rolls of cheap carpeting and calico, might have been the wares of some traveling vender. Yet, as they were only visible through a flap of the drawn curtains of the canvas hood, they did not mitigate the general aggressive effect of their owner's appearance. A red bandana handkerchief knotted and thrown loosely over his shoulders, a slouched hat pulled darkly over a head of long tangled hair, which, however, shadowed a round, comfortable face, scantily and youthfully bearded, were part of these confusing inconsistencies.

The shadows of the team wagon were already lengthening grotesquely over the flat, cultivated fields, which for some time had taken the place of the plains of wild oats in the branch road into which they had turned. The gigantic shadow of the proprietor, occasionally projected before it, was in characteristic exaggeration, and was often

obliterated by a puff of dust, stirred by the plodding hoofs of the peaceful oxen, and swept across the field by the strong afternoon trades. The sun sank lower, although a still potent presence above the horizon line; the creaking wagon lumbered still heavily along. Yet at intervals its belligerent proprietor would start up from his slouching, silent march, break out into violent, disproportionate, but utterly ineffective objurgation of his cattle, jump into the air and kick his heels together in some paroxysm of indignation against them, — an act, however, which was received always with heavy bovine indifference, the dogged scorn of swaying, repudiating heads, or the dull contempt of lazily flicking tails.

Towards sunset one or two straggling barns and cottages indicated their approach to the outskirts of a country town or settlement. Here the team halted, as if the belligerent-looking teamster had felt his appearance was inconsistent with an effeminate civilization, and the oxen were turned into an open waste opposite a nondescript wooden tenement, half farmhouse and half cabin, evidently of the rudest Western origin. He may have recognized the fact that these "shanties" were not, as the ordinary traveler might infer, the first rude shelter of the original pioneers or settlers, but the later makeshifts of some recent Western immigrants who, like himself, probably found themselves unequal to the settled habits of the village, and who still retained their nomadic instincts. It chanced, however, that the cabin at present was occupied by a New England mechanic and his family, who had emigrated by ship around Cape Horn, and who had no experience of the West, the plains, or its people. It was, therefore, with some curiosity and a certain amount of fascinated awe that the mechanic's only daughter regarded from the open door of her dwelling the arrival of this wild and lawless-looking stranger.

Meantime he had opened the curtains of the wagon and taken from its interior a number of pots, pans, and culinary utensils, which he proceeded to hang upon certain hooks that were placed on the outer ribs of the board and the sides of the vehicle. To this he added a roll of rag carpet, the end of which hung from the tail-board, and a roll of pink calico temptingly displayed on the seat. The mystification and curiosity of the young girl grew more intense at these proceedings. It looked like the ordinary exhibition of a traveling peddler, but the gloomy and embattled appearance of the man himself scouted so peaceful and commonplace a suggestion. Under the pretense of chasing away a marauding hen, she sallied out upon the waste near the wagon. It then became evident that the traveler had seen her, and was not averse to her interest in his movements, although he had not changed his attitude of savage retrospection. An occasional ejaculation of suppressed passion, as if the memory of some past conflict was too much for him, escaped him even in this peaceful occupation. As this possibly caused the young girl to still hover timidly in the distance, he suddenly entered the wagon and reappeared carrying a tin bucket, with which he somewhat ostentatiously crossed her path, his eyes darkly wandering as if seeking something.

"If you 're lookin' for the spring, it 's a spell furder on — by the willows."

It was a pleasant voice, the teamster thought, albeit with a dry, crisp, New England accent unfamiliar to his ears. He looked into the depths of an unlovely blue-check sunbonnet, and saw certain small, irregular features and a sallow cheek, lit up by a pair of perfectly innocent, trustful, and wondering brown eyes. Their timid possessor seemed to be a girl of seventeen, whose figure, although apparently clad in one of her mother's gowns, was still undeveloped and repressed by rustic hardship and innutri-

tion. As her eyes met his she saw that the face of this gloomy stranger was still youthful, by no means implacable, and, even at that moment, was actually suffused by a brick-colored blush! In matters of mere intuition, the sex, even in its most rustic phase, is still our superior; and this unsophisticated girl, as the trespasser stammered, "Thank ye, miss," was instinctively emboldened to greater freedom.

"Dad ain't tu hum, but ye kin have a drink o' milk if ye keer for it."

She motioned shyly towards the cabin, and then led the way. The stranger, with an inarticulate murmur, afterwards disguised as a cough, followed her meekly. Nevertheless, by the time they had reached the cabin he had shaken his long hair over his eyes again, and a dark abstraction gathered chiefly in his eyebrows. But it did not efface from the girl's mind the previous concession of a blush, and, although it added to her curiosity, did not alarm her. He drank the milk awkwardly. But by the laws of courtesy, even among the most savage tribes, she felt he was, at that moment at least, harmless. A timid smile fluttered around her mouth as she said: —

"When ye hung up them things I thought ye might be havin' suthing to swap or sell. That is," — with tactful politeness, — "mother was wantin' a new skillet, and it would have been handy if you 'd had one. But" — with an apologetic glance at his equipments — "if it ain't your business, it 's all right, and no offense."

"I 've got a lot o' skillets," said the strange teamster, with marked condescension, "and she can have one. They 're all that 's left outer a heap o' trader's stuff captured by Injuns t'other side of Laramie. We had a big fight to get 'em back. Lost two of our best men, — scalped at Bloody Creek, — and had to drop a dozen redskins in their tracks, — me and another man, — lyin' flat

in er wagon and firin' under the flaps o' the canvas. I don't know ez they waz wuth it," he added in gloomy retrospect; "but I've got to get rid of 'em, I reckon, somehow, afore I work over to Deadman's Gulch again."

The young girl's eyes brightened timidly with a feminine mingling of imaginative awe and personal, pitying interest. He was, after all, so young and amiable looking for such hardships and adventures. And with all this, he — this Indian fighter — was a little afraid of *her!*

"Then that's why you carry that knife and six-shooter?" she said. "But you won't want 'em now, here in the settlement."

"That's ez mebbe," said the stranger darkly. He paused, and then suddenly, as if recklessly accepting a dangerous risk, unbuckled his revolver and handed it abstractedly to the young girl. But the sheath of the bowie-knife was a fixture in his body-belt, and he was obliged to withdraw the glittering blade by itself, and to hand it to her in all its naked terrors. The young girl received the weapons with a smiling complacency. Upon such altars as these the skeptical reader will remember that Mars had once hung his "battered shield," his lance, and "uncontrolled crest."

Nevertheless, the warlike teamster was not without embarrassment. Muttering something about the necessity of "looking after his stock," he achieved a hesitating bow, backed awkwardly out of the door, and receiving from the conquering hands of the young girl his weapons again, was obliged to carry them somewhat ingloriously in his hands across the road, and put them on the wagon seat, where, in company with the culinary articles, they seemed to lose their distinctively aggressive character. Here, although his cheek was still flushed from his peaceful encounter, his voice regained some of its hoarse severity as he drove the oxen from the muddy pool into which they

had luxuriantly wandered, and brought their fodder from the wagon. Later, as the sun was setting, he lit a corncob pipe, and somewhat ostentatiously strolled down the road, with a furtive eye lingering upon the still open door of the farmhouse. Presently two angular figures appeared from it, the farmer and his wife, intent on barter.

These he received with his previous gloomy preoccupation, and a slight variation of the story he had told their daughter. It is possible that his suggestive indifference piqued and heightened the bargaining instincts of the woman, for she not only bought the skillet, but purchased a clock and a roll of carpeting. Still more, in some effusion of rustic courtesy, she extended an invitation to him to sup with them, which he declined and accepted in the same embarrassed breath, returning the proffered hospitality by confidentially showing them a couple of dried scalps, presumably of Indian origin. It was in the same moment of human weakness that he answered their polite query as to "what they might call him," by intimating that his name was "Red Jim," — a title of achievement by which he was generally known, which for the present must suffice them. But during the repast that followed this was shortened to "Mister Jim," and even familiarly by the elders to plain "Jim." Only the young girl habitually used the formal prefix in return for the "Miss Phœbe" that he called her.

With three such sympathetic and unexperienced auditors the gloomy embarrassment of Red Jim was soon dissipated, although it could hardly be said that he was generally communicative. Dark tales of Indian warfare, of night attacks and wild stampedes, in which he had always taken a prominent part, flowed freely from his lips, but little else of his past history or present prospects. And even his narratives of adventure were more or less fragmentary and imperfect in detail.

"You woz saying," said the farmer, with slow, matter-of-fact, New England deliberation, "ez how you guessed you woz beguiled amongst the Injins by your Mexican partner, a pow'ful influential man, and yet you woz the only one escaped the gen'ral slarterin'. How came the Injins to kill *him*, — their friend?"

"They did n't," returned Jim, with ominously averted eyes.

"What became of him?" continued the farmer.

Red Jim shadowed his eyes with his hand, and cast a dark glance of scrutiny out of the doors and windows. The young girl perceived it with timid, fascinated concern, and said hurriedly: —

"Don't ask him, father! Don't you see he must n't tell?"

"Not when spies may be hangin' round, and doggin' me at every step," said Red Jim, as if reflecting, with another furtive glance towards the already fading prospect without. "They 've sworn to revenge him," he added moodily.

A momentary silence followed. The farmer coughed slightly, and looked dubiously at his wife. But the two women had already exchanged feminine glances of sympathy for this evident slayer of traitors, and were apparently inclined to stop any adverse criticism.

In the midst of which a shout was heard from the road. The farmer and his family instinctively started. Red Jim alone remained unmoved, — a fact which did not lessen the admiration of his feminine audience. The host rose quickly, and went out. The figure of a horseman had halted in the road, but after a few moments' conversation with the farmer they both moved towards the house and disappeared. When the farmer returned, it was to say that "one of them 'Frisco dandies, who did n't keer about stoppin' at the hotel in the settlement," had halted to

give his "critter" a feed and drink that he might continue his journey. He had asked him to come in while the horse was feeding, but the stranger had "guessed he 'd stretch his legs outside and smoke his cigar;" he might have thought the company "not fine enough for him," but he was "civil spoken enough, and had an all-fired smart hoss, and seemed to know how to run him." To the anxious inquiries of his wife and daughter he added that the stranger did n't seem like a spy or a Mexican; was "as young as *him*," pointing to the moody Red Jim, "and a darned sight more peaceful-like in style."

Perhaps owing to the criticism of the farmer, perhaps from some still lurking suspicion of being overheard by eavesdroppers, or possibly from a humane desire to relieve the strained apprehension of the women, Red Jim, as the farmer disappeared to rejoin the stranger, again dropped into a lighter and gentler vein of reminiscence. He told them how, when a mere boy, he had been lost from an emigrant train in company with a little girl some years his junior. How, when they found themselves alone on the desolate plain, with the vanished train beyond their reach, he endeavored to keep the child from a knowledge of the real danger of their position, and to soothe and comfort her. How he carried her on his back, until, exhausted, he sank in a heap of sage-brush. How he was surrounded by Indians, who, however, never suspected his hiding-place; and how he remained motionless and breathless with the sleeping child for three hours, until they departed. How, at the last moment, he had perceived a train in the distance, and had staggered with her thither, although shot at and wounded by the trainmen in the belief that he was an Indian. How it was afterwards discovered that the child was the long-lost daughter of a millionaire; how he had resolutely refused any gratuity for saving her, and she was now a peerless young heiress,

famous in California. Whether this lighter tone of narrative suited him better, or whether the active feminine sympathy of his auditors helped him along, certain it was that his story was more coherent and intelligible and his voice less hoarse and constrained than in his previous belligerent reminiscences; his expression changed, and even his features worked into something like gentler emotion. The bright eyes of Phœbe, fastened upon him, turned dim with a faint moisture, and her pale cheek took upon itself a little color. The mother, after interjecting "Du tell," and "I wanter know," remained open-mouthed, staring at her visitor. And in the silence that followed, a pleasant, but somewhat melancholy voice came from the open door.

"I beg your pardon, but I thought I could n't be mistaken. It *is* my old friend, Jim Hooker!"

Everybody started. Red Jim stumbled to his feet with an inarticulate and hysteric exclamation. Yet the apparition that now stood in the doorway was far from being terrifying or discomposing. It was evidently the stranger, — a slender, elegantly knit figure, whose upper lip was faintly shadowed by a soft, dark mustache indicating early manhood, and whose unstudied ease in his well-fitting garments bespoke the dweller of cities. Good looking and well dressed, without the consciousness of being either; self-possessed through easy circumstances, yet without self-assertion; courteous by nature and instinct as well as from an experience of granting favors, he might have been a welcome addition to even a more critical company. But Red Jim, hurriedly seizing his outstretched hand, instantly dragged him away from the doorway into the road and out of hearing of his audience.

"Did you hear what I was saying?" he asked hoarsely.

"Well, yes, — I think so," returned the stranger, with a quiet smile.

"Ye ain't goin' back on me, Clarence, are ye, — ain't goin' to gimme away afore them, old pard, are ye?" said Jim, with a sudden change to almost pathetic pleading.

"No," returned the stranger, smiling. "And certainly not before that interested young lady, Jim. But stop. Let me look at you."

He held out both hands, took Jim's, spread them apart for a moment with a boyish gesture, and, looking in his face, said half mischievously, half sadly, "Yes, it's the same old Jim Hooker, — unchanged."

"But *you 're* changed, — reg'lar war paint, Big Injin style!" said Hooker, looking up at him with an awkward mingling of admiration and envy. "Heard you struck it rich with the old man, and was Mister Brant now!"

"Yes!" said Clarence gently, yet with a smile that had not only a tinge of weariness but even of sadness in it.

Unfortunately, the act, which was quite natural to Clarence's sensitiveness, and indeed partly sprang from some concern in his old companion's fortunes, translated itself by a very human process to Hooker's consciousness as a piece of rank affectation. *He* would have been exalted and exultant in Clarence's place, consequently any other exhibition was only "airs." Nevertheless, at the present moment Clarence was to be placated.

"You did n't mind my telling that story about your savin' Susy as my own, did ye?" he said, with a hasty glance over his shoulder. "I only did it to fool the old man and women-folks, and make talk. You won't blow on me? Ye ain't mad about it?"

It had crossed Clarence's memory that, when they were both younger, Jim Hooker had once not only borrowed his story, but his name and personality as well. Yet in his loyalty to old memories there was mingled no resentment for past injury. "Of course not," he said, with a smile that was, however, still thoughtful. "Why should I?

Only I ought to tell you that Susy Peyton is living with her adopted parents not ten miles from here, and it might reach their ears. She 's quite a young lady now, and if *I* would n't tell her story to strangers, I don't think *you* ought to, Jim."

He said this so pleasantly that even the skeptical Jim forgot what he believed were the "airs and graces" of self-abnegation, and said, "Let 's go inside, and I 'll introduce you," and turned to the house. But Clarence Brant drew back. "I 'm going on as soon as my horse is fed, for I 'm on a visit to Peyton, and I intend to push as far as Santa Inez still to-night. I want to talk with you about yourself, Jim," he added gently; "your prospects and your future. I heard," he went on hesitatingly, "that you were — at work — in a restaurant in San Francisco. I 'm glad to see that you are at least your own master here," — he glanced at the wagon. "You are selling things, I suppose? For yourself, or another? Is that team yours? Come," he added, still pleasantly, but in an older and graver voice, with perhaps the least touch of experienced authority, "be frank, Jim. Which is it? Never mind what things you 've told *in there*, tell *me* the truth about yourself. Can I help you in any way? Believe me, I should like to. We have been old friends, whatever difference in our luck, I am yours still."

Thus adjured, the redoubtable Jim, in a hoarse whisper, with a furtive eye on the house, admitted that he was traveling for an itinerant peddler, whom he expected to join later in the settlement; that he had his own methods of disposing of his wares, and (darkly) that his proprietor and the world generally had better not interfere with him; that (with a return to more confidential lightness) he had already "worked the Wild West Injin" business so successfully as to dispose of his wares, particularly in yonder house, and might do even more if not prematurely and

wantonly "blown upon," "gone back on," or "given away."

"But would n't you like to settle down on some bit of land like this, and improve it for yourself?" said Clarence. "All these valley terraces are bound to rise in value, and meantime you would be independent. It could be managed, Jim. I think *I* could arrange it for you," he went on, with a slight glow of youthful enthusiasm. "Write to me at Peyton's ranch, and I 'll see you when I come back, and we 'll hunt up something for you together." As Jim received the proposition with a kind of gloomy embarrassment, he added lightly, with a glance at the farmhouse, "It might be near *here*, you know; and you 'd have pleasant neighbors, and even eager listeners to your old adventures."

"You 'd better come in a minit before you go," said Jim, clumsily evading a direct reply. Clarence hesitated a moment, and then yielded. For an equal moment Jim Hooker was torn between secret jealousy of his old comrade's graces and a desire to present them as familiar associations of his own. But his vanity was quickly appeased.

Need it be said that the two women received this fleck and foam of a super-civilization they knew little of as almost an impertinence compared to the rugged, gloomy, pathetic, and equally youthful hero of an adventurous wilderness of which they knew still less? What availed the courtesy and gentle melancholy of Clarence Brant beside the mysterious gloom and dark savagery of Red Jim? Yet they received him patronizingly, as one who was, like themselves, an admirer of manly grace and power, and the recipient of Jim's friendship. The farmer alone seemed to prefer Clarence, and yet the latter's tacit indorsement of Red Jim, through his evident previous intimacy with him, impressed the man in Jim's favor. All of which Clarence saw with that sensitive perception which had

given him an early insight into human weakness, yet still had never shaken his youthful optimism. He smiled a little thoughtfully, but was openly fraternal to Jim, courteous to his host and family, and, as he rode away in the faint moonlight, magnificently opulent in his largess to the farmer, — his first and only assertion of his position.

The farmhouse, straggling barn, and fringe of dusty willows, the white dome of the motionless wagon, with the hanging frying-pans and kettles showing in the moonlight like black silhouettes against the staring canvas, all presently sank behind Clarence like the details of a dream, and he was alone with the moon, the hazy mystery of the level, grassy plain, and the monotony of the unending road. As he rode slowly along he thought of that other dreary plain, white with alkali patches and brown with rings of deserted camp-fires, known to his boyhood of deprivation, dependency, danger, and adventure, oddly enough, with a strange delight; and his later years of study, monastic seclusion, and final ease and independence, with an easy sense of wasted existence and useless waiting. He remembered his homeless childhood in the South, where servants and slaves took the place of the father he had never known, and the mother that he rarely saw; he remembered his abandonment to a mysterious female relation, where his natural guardians seemed to have overlooked and forgotten him, until he was sent, an all too young adventurer, to work his passage on an overland emigrant train across the plains; he remembered, as yesterday, the fears, the hopes, the dreams and dangers of that momentous journey. He recalled his little playmate, Susy, and their strange adventures — the whole incident that the imaginative Jim Hooker had translated and rehearsed as his own — rose vividly before him. He thought of the cruel end of that pilgrimage, which again left him homeless and forgotten by even the relative he

was seeking in a strange land. He remembered his solitary journey to the gold mines, taken with a boy's trust and a boy's fearlessness, and the strange protector he had found there, who had news of his missing kinsman; he remembered how this protector — whom he had at once instinctively loved — transferred him to the house of this new-found relation, who treated him kindly and sent him to the Jesuits' school, but who never awakened in him a feeling of kinship. He dreamed again of his life at school, his accidental meeting with Susy at Santa Clara, the keen revival of his boyish love for his old playmate, now a pretty schoolgirl, the petted adopted child of wealthy parents. He recalled the terrible shock that interrupted this boyish episode: the news of the death of his protector, and the revelation that this hard, silent, and mysterious man was his own father, whose reckless life and desperate reputation had impelled him to assume a disguise.

He remembered how his sudden accession to wealth and independence had half frightened him, and had always left a lurking sensitiveness that he was unfairly favored, by some mere accident, above his less lucky companions. The rude vices of his old associates had made him impatient of the feebler sensual indulgences of the later companions of his luxury, and exposed their hollow fascinations; his sensitive fastidiousness kept him clean among vulgar temptations; his clear perceptions were never blinded by selfish sophistry. Meantime his feeling for Susy remained unchanged. Pride had kept him from seeking the Peytons. His present visit was as unpremeditated as Peyton's invitation had been unlooked for by him. Yet he had not allowed himself to be deceived. He knew that this courtesy was probably due to the change in his fortune, although he had hoped it might have been some change in their opinion brought about by Susy. But he would at least see her again, not in the pretty, half-clan-

destine way she had thought necessary, but openly and as her equal.

In his rapid ride he seemed to have suddenly penetrated the peaceful calm of the night. The restless irritation of the afternoon trade-winds had subsided; the tender moonlight had hushed and tranquilly possessed the worried plain; the unending files of wild oats, far spaced and distinct, stood erect and motionless as trees; something of the sedate solemnity of a great forest seemed to have fallen upon their giant stalks. There was no dew. In that light, dry air, the heavier dust no longer rose beneath the heels of his horse, whose flying shadow passed over the field like a cloud, leaving no trail or track behind it. In the preoccupation of his thought and his breathless retrospect, the young man had ridden faster than he intended, and he now checked his panting horse. The influence of the night and the hushed landscape stole over him; his thoughts took a gentler turn; in that dim, mysterious horizon line before him, his future seemed to be dreamily peopled with airy, graceful shapes that more or less took the likeness of Susy. She was bright, coquettish, romantic, as he had last seen her; she was older, graver, and thoughtfully welcome of him; or she was cold, distant, and severely forgetful of the past. How would her adopted father and mother receive him? Would they ever look upon him in the light of a suitor to the young girl? He had no fear of Peyton, — he understood his own sex, and, young as he was, knew already how to make himself respected; but how could he overcome that instinctive aversion which Mrs. Peyton had so often made him feel he had provoked? Yet in this dreamy hush of earth and sky, what was not possible? His boyish heart beat high with daring visions.

He saw Mrs. Peyton in the porch, welcoming him with that maternal smile which his childish longing had so

often craved to share with Susy. Peyton would be there, too, — Peyton, who had once pushed back his torn straw hat to look approvingly in his boyish eyes; and Peyton, perhaps, might be proud of him.

Suddenly he started. A voice in his very ear!

"Bah! A yoke of vulgar cattle grazing on lands that were thine by right and law. Neither more nor less than that. And I tell thee, Pancho, like cattle, to be driven off or caught and branded for one's own. Ha! There are those who could swear to the truth of this on the Creed. Ay! and bring papers stamped and signed by the governor's rubric to prove it. And not that I hate them, — bah! what are those heretic swine to me? But thou dost comprehend me? It galls and pricks me to see them swelling themselves with stolen husks, and men like thee, Pancho, ousted from their own land."

Clarence had halted in utter bewilderment. No one was visible before him, behind him, on either side. The words, in Spanish, came from the air, the sky, the distant horizon, he knew not which. Was he still dreaming? A strange shiver crept over his skin as if the air had grown suddenly chill. Then another mysterious voice arose, incredulous, half mocking, but equally distinct and clear.

"Caramba! What is this? You are wandering, friend Pancho. You are still smarting from his tongue. He has the grant confirmed by his brigand government; he has the *possession*, stolen by a thief like himself; and he has the corregidores with him. For is he not one of them himself, this Judge Peyton?"

Peyton! Clarence felt the blood rush back to his face in astonishment and indignation. His heels mechanically pressed his horse's flanks, and the animal sprang forward.

"Guarda! Mira!" said the voice again in a quicker, lower tone. But this time it was evidently in the field beside him, and the heads and shoulders of two horsemen

emerged at the same moment from the tall ranks of wild oats. The mystery was solved. The strangers had been making their way along a lower level of the terraced plain, hidden by the grain, not twenty yards away, and parallel with the road they were now ascending to join. Their figures were alike formless in long striped serapes, and their features undistinguishable under stiff black sombreros.

"Buenas noches, señor," said the second voice, in formal and cautious deliberation.

A sudden inspiration made Clarence respond in English, as if he had not comprehended the stranger's words, "Eh?"

"Gooda-nighta," repeated the stranger.

"Oh, good-night," returned Clarence. They passed him. Their spurs tinkled twice or thrice, their mustangs sprang forward, and the next moment the loose folds of their serapes were fluttering at their sides like wings in their flight.

CHAPTER IV

After the chill of a dewless night the morning sun was apt to look ardently upon the Robles Rancho, if so strong an expression could describe the dry, oven-like heat of a Californian coast-range valley. Before ten o'clock the adobe wall of the patio was warm enough to permit lingering vaqueros and idle peons to lean against it, and the exposed annex was filled with sharp, resinous odors from the oozing sap of unseasoned "redwood" boards, warped and drying in the hot sunshine. Even at that early hour the climbing Castilian roses were drooping against the wooden columns of the new veranda, scarcely older than themselves, and mingling an already faded spice with the aroma of baking wood and the more material fragrance of steaming coffee, that seemed dominant everywhere.

In fact, the pretty breakfast-room, whose three broad windows, always open to the veranda, gave an *al-fresco* effect to every meal, was a pathetic endeavor to the Southern-bred Peyton to emulate the soft, luxurious, and open-air indolence of his native South, in a climate that was not only *not* tropical, but even austere in its most fervid moments. Yet, although cold draughts invaded it from the rear that morning, Judge Peyton sat alone, between the open doors and windows, awaiting the slow coming of his wife and the young ladies. He was not in an entirely comfortable mood that morning. Things were not going on well at Robles. That truculent vagabond, Pedro, had, the night before, taken himself off with a curse that had frightened even the vaqueros, who most hated him as a

companion, but who now seemed inclined to regard his absence as an injury done to their race. Peyton, uneasily conscious that his own anger had been excited by an exaggerated conception of the accident, was now, like most obstinate men, inclined to exaggerate the importance of Pedro's insolence. He was well out of it to get rid of this quarrelsome hanger-on, whose presumption and ill humor threatened the discipline of the rancho, yet he could not entirely forget that he had employed him on account of his family claims, and from a desire to placate racial jealousy and settle local differences. For the inferior Mexicans and Indian half-breeds still regarded their old masters with affection; were, in fact, more concerned for the integrity of their caste than the masters were themselves, and the old Spanish families who had made alliances with Americans, and shared their land with them, had rarely succeeded in alienating their retainers with their lands. Certain experiences in the proving of his grant before the Land Commission had taught Peyton that they were not to be depended upon. And lately there had been unpleasant rumors of the discovery of some unlooked-for claimants to a division of the grant itself, which might affect his own title.

He looked up quickly as voices and light steps on the veranda at last heralded the approach of his tardy household from the corridor. But, in spite of his preoccupation, he was startled and even awkwardly impressed with a change in Susy's appearance. She was wearing, for the first time, a long skirt, and this sudden maturing of her figure struck him, as a man, much more forcibly than it would probably have impressed a woman, more familiar with details. He had not noticed certain indications of womanhood, as significant, perhaps, in her carriage as her outlines, which had been lately perfectly apparent to her mother and Mary, but which were to him now, for the

first time, indicated by a few inches of skirt. She not only looked taller to his masculine eyes, but these few inches had added to the mystery as well as the drapery of the goddess; they were not so much the revelation of maturity as the suggestion that it was *hidden*. So impressed was he, that a half-serious lecture on her yesterday's childishness, the outcome of his irritated reflections that morning, died upon his lips. He felt he was no longer dealing with a child.

He welcomed them with that smile of bantering approbation, supposed to keep down inordinate vanity, which for some occult reason one always reserves for the members of one's own family. He was quite conscious that Susy was looking very pretty in this new and mature frock, and that as she stood beside his wife, far from aging Mrs. Peyton's good looks and figure, she appeared like an equal companion, and that they mutually "became" one another. This, and the fact that they were all, including Mary Rogers, in their freshest, gayest morning dresses, awakened a half-humorous, half-real apprehension in his mind, that he was now hopelessly surrounded by a matured sex, and in a weak minority.

"I think I ought to have been prepared," he began grimly, "for this addition to — to — the skirts of my family."

"Why, John," returned Mrs. Peyton quickly; "do you mean to say you haven't noticed that the poor child has for weeks been looking positively indecent?"

"Really, papa, I've been a sight to behold. Haven't I, Mary?" chimed in Susy.

"Yes, dear. Why, Judge, I've been wondering that Susy stood it so well, and never complained."

Peyton glanced around him at this compact feminine embattlement. It was as he feared. Yet even here he was again at fault.

"And," said Mrs. Peyton slowly, with the reserved significance of the feminine postscript in her voice, "if that Mr. Brant is coming here to-day, it would be just as well for him to see *that she is no longer a child, as when he knew her.*"

An hour later, good-natured Mary Rogers, in her character of "a dear," — which was usually indicated by the undertaking of small errands for her friend, — was gathering roses from the old garden for Susy's adornment, when she saw a vision which lingered with her for many a day. She had stopped to look through the iron grille in the adobe wall, across the open wind-swept plain. Miniature waves were passing over the wild oats, with glittering disturbances here and there in the depressions like the sparkling of green foam; the horizon line was sharply defined against the hard, steel-blue sky; everywhere the brand-new morning was shining with almost painted brilliancy; the vigor, spirit, and even crudeness of youth were over all. The young girl was dazzled and bewildered. Suddenly, as if blown out of the waving grain, or an incarnation of the vivid morning, the bright and striking figure of a youthful horseman flashed before the grille. It was Clarence Brant! Mary Rogers had always seen him, in the loyalty of friendship, with Susy's prepossessed eyes, yet she fancied that morning that he had never looked so handsome before. Even the foppish fripperies of his riding-dress and silver trappings seemed as much the natural expression of conquering youth as the invincible morning sunshine. Perhaps it might have been a reaction against Susy's caprice or some latent susceptibility of her own; but a momentary antagonism to her friend stirred even her kindly nature. What right had Susy to trifle with such an opportunity? Who was *she* to hesitate over this gallant prince?

But Prince Charming's quick eyes had detected her, and

A youthful horseman flashed before the Grille

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the next moment his beautiful horse was beside the grating, and his ready hand of greeting extended through the bars.

"I suppose I am early and unexpected, but I slept at Santa Inez last night, that I might ride over in the cool of the morning. My things are coming by the stagecoach, later. It seemed such a slow way of coming one's self."

Mary Rogers's black eyes intimated that the way he had taken was the right one, but she gallantly recovered herself and remembered her position as confidante. And here was the opportunity of delivering Susy's warning unobserved. She withdrew her hand from Clarence's frank grasp, and passing it through the grating, patted the sleek, shining flanks of his horse, with a discreet division of admiration.

"And such a lovely creature, too! And Susy will be so delighted! and oh, Mr. Brant, please, you 're to say nothing of having met her at Santa Clara. It 's just as well not to begin with *that* here, for, you see" (with a large, maternal manner), "you were both *so* young then."

Clarence drew a quick breath. It was the first check to his vision of independence and equal footing! Then his invitation was *not* the outcome of a continuous friendship revived by Susy, as he had hoped; the Peytons had known nothing of his meeting with her, or perhaps they would not have invited him. He was here as an impostor, — and all because Susy had chosen to make a mystery of a harmless encounter, which might have been explained, and which they might have even countenanced. He thought bitterly of his old playmate for a brief moment, — as brief as Mary's antagonism. The young girl noticed the change in his face, but misinterpreted it.

"Oh, there 's no danger of its coming out if you don't say anything," she said quickly. "Ride on to the house, and don't wait for me. You 'll find them in the patio on the veranda."

Clarence moved on, but not as spiritedly as before. Nevertheless there was still dash enough about him and the animal he bestrode to stir into admiration the few lounging vaqueros of a country which was apt to judge the status of a rider by the quality of his horse. Nor was the favorable impression confined to them alone. Peyton's gratification rang out cheerily in his greeting: —

"Bravo, Clarence! You are here in true caballero style. Thanks for the compliment to the rancho."

For a moment the young man was transported back again to his boyhood, and once more felt Peyton's approving hand pushing back the worn straw hat from his childish forehead. A faint color rose to his cheeks; his eyes momentarily dropped. The highest art could have done no more! The slight aggressiveness of his youthful finery and picturesque good looks was condoned at once; his modesty conquered where self-assertion might have provoked opposition, and even Mrs. Peyton felt herself impelled to come forward with an outstretched hand scarcely less frank than her husband's. Then Clarence lifted his eyes. He saw before him the woman to whom his childish heart had gone out with the inscrutable longing and adoration of a motherless, homeless, companionless boy; the woman who had absorbed the love of his playmate without sharing it with him; who had showered her protecting and maternal caresses on Susy, a waif like himself, yet had not only left his heart lonely and desolate, but had even added to his childish distrust of himself the thought that he had excited her aversion. He saw her more beautiful than ever in her restored health, freshness of coloring, and mature roundness of outline. He was unconsciously touched with a man's admiration for her without losing his boyish yearnings and half-filial affection; in her new materialistic womanhood his youthful imagination had lifted her to a queen and goddess. There

was all this appeal in his still boyish eyes, — eyes that had never yet known shame or fear in the expression of their emotions; there was all this in the gesture with which he lifted Mrs. Peyton's fingers to his lips. The little group saw in this act only a Spanish courtesy in keeping with his accepted rôle. But a thrill of surprise, of embarrassment, of intense gratification passed over her. For he had not even looked at Susy!

Her relenting was graceful. She welcomed him with a winning smile. Then she motioned pleasantly towards Susy.

"But here is an older friend, Mr. Brant, whom you do not seem to recognize, — Susy, whom you have not seen since she was a child."

A quick flush rose to Clarence's cheek. The group smiled at this evident youthful confession of some boyish admiration. But Clarence knew that his truthful blood was merely resenting the deceit his lips were sealed from divulging. He did not dare to glance at Susy; it added to the general amusement that the young girl was obliged to present herself. But in this interval she had exchanged glances with Mary Rogers, who had rejoined the group, and she knew she was safe. She smiled with gracious condescension at Clarence; observed, with the patronizing superiority of age and established position, that he had *grown*, but had not greatly changed, and, it is needless to say, again filled her mother's heart with joy. Clarence, still intoxicated with Mrs. Peyton's kindliness, and, perhaps, still embarrassed by remorse, had not time to remark the girl's studied attitude. He shook hands with her cordially, and then, in the quick reaction of youth, accepted with humorous gravity the elaborate introduction to Mary Rogers by Susy, which completed this little comedy. And if, with a woman's quickness, Mrs. Peyton detected a certain lingering glance which passed between Mary Rogers

and Clarence, and misinterpreted it, it was only a part of that mystification into which these youthful actors are apt to throw their mature audiences.

"Confess, Ally," said Peyton cheerfully, as the three young people suddenly found their tongues with aimless vivacity and inconsequent laughter, and started with unintelligible spirits for an exploration of the garden, "confess now that your *bête noir* is really a very manly as well as a very presentable young fellow. By Jove! the padres have made a Spanish swell out of him without spoiling the Brant grit, either! Come, now; you 're not afraid that Susy's style will suffer from *his* companionship. 'Pon my soul, she might borrow a little of his courtesy to his elders without indelicacy. I only wish she had as sincere a way of showing her respect for you as he has. Did you notice that he really did n't seem to see anybody else but you at first? And yet you never were a friend to him, like Susy."

The lady tossed her head slightly, but smiled.

"This is the first time he 's seen Mary Rogers, is n't it?" she said meditatively.

"I reckon. But what 's that to do with his politeness to you?"

"And do her parents know him?" she continued, without replying.

"How do I know? I suppose everybody has heard of him. Why?"

"Because I think they 've taken a fancy to each other."

"What in the name of folly, Ally" — began the despairing Peyton.

"When you invite a handsome, rich, and fascinating young man into the company of young ladies, John," returned Mrs. Peyton in her severest manner, "you must not forget you owe a certain responsibility to the parents. I shall certainly look after Miss Rogers."

CHAPTER V

Although the three young people had left the veranda together, when they reached the old garden Clarence and Susy found themselves considerably in advance of Mary Rogers, who had become suddenly and deeply interested in the beauty of a passion-vine near the gate. At the first discovery of their isolation their voluble exchange of information about themselves and their occupations since their last meeting stopped simultaneously. Clarence, who had forgotten his momentary irritation, and had recovered his old happiness in Susy's presence, was nevertheless conscious of some other change in her than that suggested by the lengthened skirt and the later and more delicate accentuation of her prettiness. It was not her affectation of superiority and older social experience, for that was only the outcome of what he had found charming in her as a child, and which he still good humoredly accepted; nor was it her characteristic exaggeration of speech, which he still pleasantly recognized. It was something else, vague and indefinite, — something that had been unnoticed while Mary was with them, but had now come between them like some unknown presence which had taken the confidante's place. He remained silent, looking at her half-brightening cheek and conscious profile. Then he spoke with awkward directness.

"You are changed, Susy, more than in looks."

"Hush," said the girl in a tragic whisper, with a warning gesture towards the blandly unconscious Mary.

"But," returned Clarence wonderingly, "she 's your — our friend, you know."

"I *don't* know," said Susy in a still deeper tone, "that is — oh, don't ask me! But when you 're always surrounded by spies, when you can't say your soul is your own, you doubt everybody!" There was such a pretty distress in her violet eyes and curving eyebrows, that Clarence, albeit vague as to its origin and particulars, nevertheless possessed himself of the little hand that was gesticulating dangerously near his own, and pressed it sympathetically. Perhaps preoccupied with her emotions, she did not immediately withdraw it, as she went on rapidly: "And if you were cooped up here, day after day, behind these bars," pointing to the grille, "you 'd know what I suffer."

"But" — began Clarence.

"Hush!" said Susy, with a stamp of her little foot.

Clarence, who had only wished to point out that the whole lower end of the garden wall was in ruins and the grille really was no prevention, "hushed."

"And listen! Don't pay me much attention to-day, but talk to *her*," indicating the still discreet and distant Mary, "before father and mother. Not a word to her of this confidence, Clarence. To-morrow ride out alone on your beautiful horse, and come back by way of the woods, beyond our turning, at four o'clock. There 's a trail to the right of the big madroño tree. Take that. Be careful and keep a good lookout, for she must n't see you."

"Who must n't see me?" said the puzzled Clarence.

"Why, Mary, of course, you silly boy!" returned the girl impatiently. "She 'll be looking for *me*. Go now, Clarence! Stop! Look at that lovely big maiden's-blush up there," pointing to a pink-suffused specimen of rose grandiflora hanging on the wall. "Get it, Clarence, — that one, — I 'll show you where, — there!" They had already plunged into the leafy bramble, and, standing on tiptoe, with her hand on his shoulder and head upturned,

Susy's cheek had innocently approached Clarence's own. At this moment Clarence, possibly through some confusion of color, fragrance, or softness of contact, seemed to have availed himself of the opportunity, in a way which caused Susy to instantly rejoin Mary Rogers with affected dignity, leaving him to follow a few moments later with the captured flower.

Without trying to understand the reason of to-morrow's rendezvous, and perhaps not altogether convinced of the reality of Susy's troubles, he, however, did not find that difficulty in carrying out her other commands which he had expected. Mrs. Peyton was still gracious, and, with feminine tact, induced him to talk of himself, until she was presently in possession of his whole history, barring the episode of his meeting with Susy, since he had parted with them. He felt a strange satisfaction in familiarly pouring out his confidences to this superior woman, whom he had always held in awe. There was a new delight in her womanly interest in his trials and adventures, and a subtle pleasure even in her half-motherly criticism and admonition of some passages. I am afraid he forgot Susy, who listened with the complacency of an exhibitor; Mary, whose black eyes dilated alternately with sympathy for the performer and deprecation of Mrs. Peyton's critical glances; and Peyton, who, however, seemed lost in thought, and preoccupied. Clarence was happy. The softly shaded lights in the broad, spacious, comfortably furnished drawing-room shone on the group before him. It was a picture of refined domesticity which the homeless Clarence had never known except as a vague, half-painful, boyish remembrance; it was a realization of welcome that far exceeded his wildest boyish vision of the preceding night. With that recollection came another, — a more uneasy one. He remembered how that vision had been interrupted by the strange voices in the road, and their vague but ominous

import to his host. A feeling of self-reproach came over him. The threats had impressed him as only mere braggadocio, — he knew the characteristic exaggeration of the race, — but perhaps he ought to privately tell Peyton of the incident at once.

The opportunity came later, when the ladies had retired, and Peyton, wrapped in a poncho in a rocking-chair, on the now chilly veranda, looked up from his reverie and a cigar. Clarence casually introduced the incident, as if only for the sake of describing the supernatural effect of the hidden voices, but he was concerned to see that Peyton was considerably disturbed by their more material import. After questioning him as to the appearance of the two men, his host said: "I don't mind telling you, Clarence, that as far as that fellow's intentions go he is quite sincere, although his threats are only borrowed thunder. He is a man whom I have just dismissed for carelessness and insolence, — two things that run in double harness in this country, — but I should be more afraid to find him at my back on a dark night, alone on the plains, than to confront him in daylight, in the witness box, against me. He was only repeating a silly rumor that the title to this rancho and the nine square leagues beyond would be attacked by some speculators."

"But I thought your title was confirmed two years ago," said Clarence.

"The *grant* was confirmed," returned Peyton, "which means that the conveyance of the Mexican government of these lands to the ancestor of Victor Robles was held to be legally proven by the United States Land Commission, and a patent issued to all those who held under it. I and my neighbors hold under it by purchase from Victor Robles, subject to the confirmation of the Land Commission. But that confirmation was only of Victor's *great-grandfather's title*, and it is now alleged that as Victor's father

died without making a will, Victor has claimed and disposed of property which he ought to have divided with his *sisters*. At least, some speculating rascals in San Francisco have set up what they call 'the Sisters' title,' and are selling it to actual settlers on the unoccupied lands beyond. As, by the law, it would hold possession against the mere ordinary squatters, whose only right is based, as you know, on the presumption that there is *no title claimed*, it gives the possessor immunity to enjoy the use of the property until the case is decided, and even should the original title hold good against his, the successful litigant would probably be willing to pay for improvements and possession to save the expensive and tedious process of ejectment."

"But this does not affect *you*, who have already possession?" said Clarence quickly.

"No, not as far as *this house* and the lands I actually *occupy and cultivate* are concerned; and they know that I am safe to fight to the last, and carry the case to the Supreme Court in that case, until the swindle is exposed, or they drop it; but I may have to pay them something to keep the squatters off my *unoccupied* land."

"But you surely would n't recognize those rascals in any way?" said the astonished Clarence.

"As against other rascals? Why not?" returned Peyton grimly. "I only pay for the possession which their sham title gives me to my own land. If by accident that title obtains, I am still on the safe side." After a pause he said, more gravely, "What you overheard, Clarence, shows me that the plan is more forward than I had imagined, and that I may have to fight traitors here."

"I hope, sir," said Clarence, with a quick glow in his earnest face, "that you 'll let me help you. You thought I did once, you remember, — with the Indians."

There was so much of the old Clarence in his boyish

appeal and eager, questioning face that Peyton, who had been talking to him as a younger but equal man of affairs, was startled into a smile. "You did, Clarence, though the Indians butchered your friends, after all. I don't know, though, but that your experiences with those Spaniards — you must have known a lot of them when you were with Don Juan Robinson and at the college — might be of service in getting at evidence, or smashing their witnesses if it comes to a fight. But just now, *money* is everything. They must be bought *off the land* if I have to mortgage it for the purpose. That strikes you as a rather heroic remedy, Clarence, eh?" he continued in his old, half-bantering attitude towards Clarence's inexperienced youth, "don't it?"

But Clarence was not thinking of that. Another more audacious but equally youthful and enthusiastic idea had taken possession of his mind, and he lay awake half that night revolving it. It was true that it was somewhat impractically mixed with his visions of Mrs. Peyton and Susy, and even included his previous scheme of relief for the improvident and incorrigible Hooker. But it gave a wonderful sincerity and happiness to his slumbers that night, which the wiser and older Peyton might have envied, and I wot not was in the long run as correct and sagacious as Peyton's sleepless cogitations. And in the early morning Mr. Clarence Brant, the young capitalist, sat down to his traveling-desk and wrote two clear-headed, logical, and practical business letters, — one to his banker, and the other to his former guardian, Don Juan Robinson, — as his first step in a resolve that was, nevertheless, perhaps as wildly quixotic and enthusiastic as any dream his boyish and unselfish heart had ever indulged.

At breakfast, in the charmed freedom of the domestic circle, Clarence forgot Susy's capricious commands of yesterday, and began to address himself to her in his old ear-

nest fashion, until he was warned by a significant knitting of the young lady's brows and monosyllabic responses. But in his youthful loyalty to Mrs. Peyton, he was more pained to notice Susy's occasional unconscious indifference to her adopted mother's affectionate expression, and a more conscious disregard of her wishes. So uneasy did he become, in his sensitive concern for Mrs. Peyton's half-concealed mortification, that he gladly accepted Peyton's offer to go with him to visit the farm and corral. As the afternoon approached, with another twinge of self-reproach, he was obliged to invent some excuse to decline certain hospitable plans of Mrs. Peyton's for his entertainment, and at half past three stole somewhat guiltily, with his horse, from the stables. But he had to pass before the outer wall of the garden and grille, through which he had seen Mary the day before. Raising his eyes mechanically, he was startled to see Mrs. Peyton standing behind the grating, with her abstracted gaze fixed upon the wind-tossed, level grain beyond her. She smiled as she saw him, but there were traces of tears in her proud, handsome eyes.

"You are going to ride?" she said pleasantly.

"Y-e-es," stammered the shamefaced Clarence.

She glanced at him wistfully.

"You are right. The girls have gone away by themselves. Mr. Peyton has ridden over to Santa Inez on this dreadful land business, and I suppose you 'd have found him a dull riding companion. It is rather stupid here. I quite envy you, Mr. Brant, your horse and your freedom."

"But, Mrs. Peyton," broke in Clarence impulsively, "you have a horse — I saw it, a lovely lady's horse — eating its head off in the stable. Won't you let me run back and order it; and won't you, please, come out with me for a good, long gallop?"

He meant what he said. He had spoken quickly, impulsively, but with the perfect understanding in his own

mind that his proposition meant the complete abandonment of his rendezvous with Susy. Mrs. Peyton was astounded and slightly stirred with his earnestness, albeit unaware of all it implied.

"It 's a great temptation, Mr. Brant," she said, with a playful smile, which dazzled Clarence with its first faint suggestion of a refined woman's coquetry; "but I 'm afraid that Mr. Peyton would think me going mad in my old age. No. Go on and enjoy your gallop, and if you should see those giddy girls anywhere, send them home early for chocolate, before the cold wind gets up."

She turned, waved her slim white hand playfully in acknowledgment of Clarence's bared head, and moved away.

For the first few moments the young man tried to find relief in furious riding, and in bullying his spirited horse. Then he pulled quickly up. What was he doing? What was he going to do? What foolish, vapid deceit was this that he was going to practice upon that noble, queenly, confiding, generous woman? (He had already forgotten that she had always distrusted him.) What a fool he was not to tell her half jokingly that he expected to meet Susy! But would he have dared to talk half jokingly to such a woman on such a topic? And would it have been honorable without disclosing the *whole* truth, — that they had met secretly before? And was it fair to Susy? — dear, innocent, childish Susy! Yet something must be done! It was such trivial, purposeless deceit, after all; for this noble woman, Mrs. Peyton, so kind, so gentle, would never object to his loving Susy and marrying her. And they would live happily together; and Mrs. Peyton would never be separated from them, but always beaming tenderly upon them as she did just now in the garden. Yes, he would have a serious understanding with Susy, and that would excuse the clandestine meeting to-day.

His rapid pace, meantime, had brought him to the imperceptible incline of the terrace, and he was astonished, in turning in the saddle, to find that the casa, corral, and outbuildings had completely vanished, and that behind him rolled only the long sea of grain, which seemed to have swallowed them in its yellowing depths. Before him lay the wooded ravine through which the stagecoach passed, which was also the entrance to the rancho, and there, too, probably, was the turning of which Susy had spoken. But it was still early for the rendezvous; indeed, he was in no hurry to meet her in his present discontented state, and he made a listless circuit of the field, in the hope of discovering the phenomena that had caused the rancho's mysterious disappearance. When he had found that it was the effect of the different levels, his attention was arrested by a multitude of moving objects in a still more distant field, which proved to be a band of wild horses. In and out among them, circling aimlessly, as it seemed to him, appeared two horsemen apparently performing some mystic evolution. To add to their singular performance, from time to time one of the flying herd, driven by the horsemen far beyond the circle of its companions, dropped suddenly and unaccountably in full career. The field closed over it as if it had been swallowed up. In a few moments it appeared again, trotting peacefully behind its former pursuer. It was some time before Clarence grasped the meaning of this strange spectacle. Although the clear, dry atmosphere sharply accented the silhouette-like outlines of the men and horses, so great was the distance that the slender forty-foot lasso, which in the skillful hands of the horsemen had effected these captures, was *completely invisible!* The horsemen were Peyton's vaqueros, making a selection from the young horses for the market. He remembered now that Peyton had told him that he might be obliged to raise money by sacrificing

some of his stock, and the thought brought back Clarence's uneasiness as he turned again to the trail. Indeed, he was hardly in the vein for a gentle tryst, as he entered the wooded ravine to seek the madroño tree which was to serve as a guide to his lady's bower.

A few rods further, under the cool vault filled with woodland spicing, he came upon it. In its summer harlequin dress of scarlet and green, with hanging bells of poly-tinted berries, like some personified sylvan Folly, it seemed a fitting symbol of Susy's childish masquerade of passion. Its bizarre beauty, so opposed to the sober gravity of the sedate pines and hemlocks, made it an unmistakable landmark. Here he dismounted and picketed his horse. And here, beside it, to the right, ran the little trail crawling over mossy boulders; a narrow yellow track through the carpet of pine-needles between the closest file of trees; an almost imperceptible streak across pools of chickweed at their roots, and a brown and ragged swath through the ferns. As he went on, the anxiety and uneasiness that had possessed him gave way to a languid intoxication of the senses; the mysterious seclusion of these woodland depths recovered the old influence they had exerted over his boyhood. He was not returning to Susy, as much as to the older love of his youth, of which she was, perhaps, only an incident. It was therefore with an odd boyish thrill again that, coming suddenly upon a little hollow, like a deserted nest, where the lost trail made him hesitate, he heard the crackle of a starched skirt behind him, was conscious of the subtle odor of freshly ironed and scented muslin, and felt the gentle pressure of delicate fingers upon his eyes.

"Susy!"

"You silly boy! Where were you blundering to? Why didn't you look around you?"

"I thought I would hear your voices."

"Whose voices, idiot?"

"Yours and Mary's," returned Clarence innocently, looking round for the confidante.

"Oh, indeed! Then you wanted to see *Mary?* Well, she 's looking for me somewhere. Perhaps you 'll go and find her, or shall I?"

She was offering to pass him when he laid his hand on hers to detain her. She instantly evaded it, and drew herself up to her full height, incontestably displaying the dignity of the added inches to her skirt. All this was charmingly like the old Susy, but it did not bid fair to help him to a serious interview. And, looking at the pretty, pink, mocking face before him, with the witchery of the woodland still upon him, he began to think that he had better put it off.

"Never mind about Mary," he said laughingly. "But you said you wanted to see me, Susy; and here I am."

"Said I wanted to see you?" repeated Susy, with her blue eyes lifted in celestial scorn and wonderment. "Said *I* wanted to see you? Are you not mistaken, Mr. Brant? Really, I imagined that you came here to see *me.*"

With her fair head upturned, and the leaf of her scarlet lip temptingly curled over, Clarence began to think this latest phase of her extravagance the most fascinating. He drew nearer to her as he said gently, "You know what I mean, Susy. You said yesterday you were troubled. I thought you might have something to tell me."

"I should think it was *you* who might have something to tell me after all these years," she said poutingly, yet self-possessed. "But I suppose you came here only to see Mary and mother. I 'm sure you let them know that plainly enough last evening."

"But you said" — began the stupefied Clarence.

"Never mind what *I* said. It 's always what *I* say, never what *you* say; and you don't say anything."

The woodland influence must have been still very strong upon Clarence that he did not discover in all this that, while Susy's general capriciousness was unchanged, there was a new and singular insincerity in her manifest acting. She was either concealing the existence of some other real emotion, or assuming one that was absent. But he did not notice it, and only replied tenderly: —

"But I want to say a great deal to you, Susy. I want to say that if you still feel as I do, and as I have always felt, and you think you could be happy as *I* would be if — if — we could be always together, we need not conceal it from your mother and father any longer. I am old enough to speak for myself, and I am my own master. Your mother has been very kind to me, — so kind that it does n't seem quite right to deceive her, — and when I tell her that I love you, and that I want you to be my wife, I believe she will give us her blessing."

Susy uttered a strange little laugh, and with an assumption of coyness, that was, however, still affected, stooped to pick a few berries from a manzanita bush.

"I 'll tell you what she 'll say, Clarence. She 'll say you 're frightfully young, and so you are!"

The young fellow tried to echo the laugh, but felt as if he had received a blow. For the first time he was conscious of the truth: this girl, whom he had fondly regarded as a child, had already passed him in the race; she had become a woman before he was yet a man, and now stood before him, maturer in her knowledge, and older in her understanding, of herself and of him. This was the change that had perplexed him; this was the presence that had come between them, — a Susy he had never known before.

She laughed at his changed expression, and then swung herself easily to a sitting posture on the low projecting branch of a hemlock. The act was still girlish, but, nev-

ertheless, she looked down upon him in a superior, patronizing way. "Now, Clarence," she said, with a half-abstracted manner, "don't you be a big fool! If you talk that way to mother, she 'll only tell you to wait two or three years until you know your own mind, and she 'll pack me off to that horrid school again, besides watching me like a cat every moment you are here. If you want to stay here, and see me sometimes like this, you 'll just behave as you have done, and say nothing. Do you see? Perhaps you don't care to come, or are satisfied with Mary and mother. Say so, then. Goodness knows, I don't want to force you to come here."

Modest and reserved as Clarence was generally, I fear that bashfulness of approach to the other sex was not one of these indications. He walked up to Susy with appalling directness, and passed his arm around her waist. She did not move, but remained looking at him and his intruding arm with a certain critical curiosity, as if awaiting some novel sensation. At which he kissed her. She then slowly disengaged his arm, and said: —

"Really, upon my word, Clarence," in perfectly level tones, and slipped quietly to the ground.

He again caught her in his arms, encircling her disarranged hair and part of the beribboned hat hanging over her shoulder, and remained for an instant holding her thus silently and tenderly. Then she freed herself with an abstracted air, a half smile, and an unchanged color except where her soft cheek had been abraded by his coat collar.

"You 're a bold, rude boy, Clarence," she said, putting back her hair quietly, and straightening the brim of her hat. "Heaven knows where you learned manners!" and then, from a safer distance, with the same critical look in her violet eyes, "I suppose you think mother would allow *that* if she knew it?"

But Clarence, now completely subjugated, with the

memory of the kiss upon him and a heightened color, protested that he only wanted to make their intercourse less constrained, and to have their relations, even their engagement, recognized by her parents; still he would take her advice. Only there was always the danger that if they were discovered she would be sent back to the convent all the same, and his banishment, instead of being the probation of a few years, would be a perpetual separation.

"We could always run away, Clarence," responded the young girl calmly. "There 's nothing the matter with *that.*"

Clarence was startled. The idea of desolating the sad, proud, handsome Mrs. Peyton, whom he worshiped, and her kind husband, whom he was just about to serve, was so grotesque and confusing, that he said hopelessly, "Yes."

"Of course," she continued, with the same odd affectation of coyness, which was, however, distinctly uncalled for, as she eyed him from under her broad hat, "you need n't come with me unless you like. I can run away by myself, — if I want to! I 've thought of it before. One can't stand everything!"

"But, Susy," said Clarence, with a swift remorseful recollection of her confidence yesterday, "is there really anything troubles you? Tell me, dear. What is it?"

"Oh, nothing — *everything!* It 's no use, — *you* can't understand! *You* like it, I know you do. I can see it; it 's your style. But it 's stupid, it 's awful, Clarence! With mamma snooping over you and around you all day, with her 'dear child,' 'mamma's pet,' and 'What is it, dear?' and 'Tell it all to your own mamma,' — as if I would! And 'my own mamma,' indeed! As if I did n't know, Clarence, that she *is n't.* And papa, caring for nothing but this hideous, dreary rancho, and the huge, empty plains. It 's worse than school, for there, at least, when you went out, you could see something besides cattle

and horses. and yellow-faced half-breeds! But here — Lord! it 's only a wonder I have n't run away before!"

Startled and shocked as Clarence was at this revelation, accompanied as it was by a hardness of manner that was new to him, the influence of the young girl was still so strong upon him that he tried to evade it as only an extravagance, and said with a faint smile, "But where would you run to?"

She looked at him cunningly, with her head on one side, and then said: —

"I have friends, and" —

She hesitated, pursing up her pretty lips.

"And what?"

"Relations."

"Relations?"

"Yes, — an aunt by marriage. She lives in Sacramento. She 'd be overjoyed to have me come to her. Her second husband has a theatre there."

"But, Susy, what does Mrs. Peyton know of this?"

"Nothing. Do you think I 'd tell her, and have her buy them up as she has my other relations? Do you suppose I don't know that I 've been bought up like a nigger?"

She looked indignant, compressing her delicate little nostrils, and yet, somehow, Clarence had the same singular impression that she was only acting.

The calling of a far-off voice came faintly through the wood.

"That 's Mary, looking for me," said Susy composedly. "You must go, now, Clarence. Quick! Remember what I said, — and don't breathe a word of this. Good-by."

But Clarence was standing still, breathless, hopelessly disturbed, and irresolute. Then he turned away mechanically towards the trail.

"Well, Clarence?"

She was looking at him half reproachfully, half coquet-

tishly, with smiling, parted lips. He hastened to forget himself and his troubles upon them twice and thrice. Then she quickly disengaged herself, whispered, "Go, now," and, as Mary's call was repeated, Clarence heard her voice, high and clear, answering, "Here, dear," as he was plunging into the thicket.

He had scarcely reached the madroño tree again and remounted his horse, before he heard the sound of hoofs approaching from the road. In his present uneasiness he did not care to be discovered so near the rendezvous, and drew back into the shadow until the horseman should pass. It was Peyton, with a somewhat disturbed face, riding rapidly. Still less was he inclined to join or immediately follow him, but he was relieved when his host, instead of taking the direct road to the rancho, through the wild oats, turned off in the direction of the corral.

A moment later Clarence wheeled into the direct road, and presently found himself in the long afternoon shadows through the thickest of the grain. He was riding slowly, immersed in thought, when he was suddenly startled by a hissing noise at his ear, and what seemed to be the uncoiling stroke of a leaping serpent at his side. Instinctively he threw himself forward on his horse's neck, and as the animal shied into the grain, felt the crawling scrape and jerk of a horsehair lariat across his back and down his horse's flanks. He reined in indignantly and stood up in his stirrups. Nothing was to be seen above the level of the grain. Beneath him the trailing riata had as noiselessly vanished as if it had been indeed a gliding snake. Had he been the victim of a practical joke, or of the blunder of some stupid vaquero? For he made no doubt that it was the lasso of one of the performers he had watched that afternoon. But his preoccupied mind did not dwell long upon it, and by the time he had reached the wall of the old garden, the incident was forgotten.

CHAPTER VI

Relieved of Clarence Brant's embarrassing presence, Jim Hooker did not, however, refuse to avail himself of that opportunity to expound to the farmer and his family the immense wealth, influence, and importance of the friend who had just left him. Although Clarence's plan had suggested reticence, Hooker could not forego the pleasure of informing them that "Clar" Brant had just offered to let him into an extensive land speculation. He had previously declined a large share or original location in a mine of Clarence's, now worth a million, because it was not "his style." But the land speculation in a country of unsettled titles and lawless men, he need not remind them, required some experience of border warfare. He would not say positively, although he left them to draw their own conclusions with gloomy significance, that this was why Clarence had sought him. With this dark suggestion, he took leave of Mr. and Mrs. Hopkins and their daughter Phœbe the next day, not without some natural human emotion, and peacefully drove his team and wagon into the settlement of Fair Plains.

He was not prepared, however, for a sudden realization of his imaginative prospects. A few days after his arrival in Fair Plains, he received a letter from Clarence, explaining that he had not time to return to Hooker to consult him, but had, nevertheless, fulfilled his promise, by taking advantage of an opportunity of purchasing the Spanish Sisters' title to certain unoccupied lands near the settlement. As these lands in part joined the section already

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preëmpted and occupied by Hopkins, Clarence thought that Jim Hooker would choose that part for the sake of his neighbor's company. He inclosed a draft on San Francisco, for a sum sufficient to enable Jim to put up a cabin and "stock" the property, which he begged he would consider in the light of a loan, to be paid back in installments, only when the property could afford it. At the same time, if Jim was in difficulty, he was to inform him. The letter closed with a characteristic Clarence-like mingling of enthusiasm and older wisdom. "I wish you luck, Jim, but I see no reason why you should trust to it. I don't know of anything that could keep you from making yourself independent of any one, if you go to work with a *long aim* and don't fritter away your chances on short ones. If I were you, old fellow, I 'd drop the Plains and the Indians out of my thoughts, or at least out of my *talk*, for a while; they won't help you in the long run. The people who believe you will be jealous of you; those who don't, will look down upon you, and if they get to questioning your little Indian romances, Jim, they 'll be apt to question your civilized facts. That won't help you in the ranching business, and that 's your only real grip now." For the space of two or three hours after this, Jim was reasonably grateful and even subdued, — so much so that his employer, to whom he confided his good fortune, frankly confessed that he believed him from that unusual fact alone. Unfortunately, neither the practical lesson conveyed in this grim admission, nor the sentiment of gratitude, remained long with Jim. Another idea had taken possession of his fancy. Although the land nominated in his bill of sale had been, except on the occasion of his own temporary halt there, always unoccupied, unsought, and unclaimed, and although he was amply protected by legal certificates, he gravely collected a posse of three or four idlers from Fair Plains, armed them at his

own expense, and in the dead of night took belligerent and forcible possession of the peaceful domain which the weak generosity and unheroic dollars of Clarence had purchased for him! A martial camp-fire tempered the chill night winds to the pulses of the invaders, and enabled them to sleep on their arms in the field they had won. The morning sun revealed to the astonished Hopkins family the embattled plain beyond, with its armed sentries. Only then did Jim Hooker condescend to explain the reason of his warlike occupation, with dark hints of the outlying "squatters" and "jumpers," whose incursions their boldness alone had repulsed. The effect of this romantic situation upon the two women, with the slight fascination of danger imported into their quiet lives, may well be imagined. Possibly owing to some incautious questioning by Mr. Hopkins, and some doubts of the discipline and sincerity of his posse, Jim discharged them the next day; but during the erection of his cabin by some peaceful carpenters from the settlement, he returned to his gloomy preoccupation and the ostentatious wearing of his revolvers. As an opulent and powerful neighbor, he took his meals with the family while his house was being built, and generally impressed them with a sense of security they had never missed.

Meantime, Clarence, duly informed of the installation of Jim as his tenant, underwent a severe trial. It was necessary for his plans that this should be kept a secret at present, and this was no easy thing for his habitually frank and open nature. He had once mentioned that he had met Jim at the settlement, but the information was received with such indifference by Susy, and such marked disfavor by Mrs. Peyton, that he said no more. He accompanied Peyton in his rides around the rancho, fully possessed himself of the details of its boundaries, the debatable lands held by the enemy, and listened with beat-

ing pulses, but a hushed tongue, to his host's ill-concealed misgivings.

"You see, Clarence, that lower terrace?" he said, pointing to a far-reaching longitudinal plain beyond the corral; "it extends from my corral to Fair Plains. That is claimed by the Sisters' title, and, as things appear to be going, if a division of the land is made it will be theirs. It 's bad enough to have this best grazing land lying just on the flanks of the corral held by these rascals at an absurd prohibitory price, but I am afraid that it may be made to mean something even worse. According to the old surveys, these terraces on different levels were the natural divisions of the property, — one heir or his tenant taking one, and another taking another, — an easy distinction that saved the necessity of boundary fencing or monuments, and gave no trouble to people who were either kinsmen or lived in lazy patriarchal concord. That is the form of division they are trying to reëstablish now. Well," he continued, suddenly lifting his eyes to the young man's flushed face, in some unconscious, sympathetic response to his earnest breathlessness, "although my boundary line extends half a mile into that field, my house and garden and corral *are actually upon that terrace or level.*" They certainly appeared to Clarence to be on the same line as the long field beyond. "If," went on Peyton, "such a decision is made, these men will push on and claim the house and everything on the terrace."

"But," said Clarence quickly, "you said their title was only valuable where they have got or can give *possession.* You already have yours. They can't take it from you except by force."

"No," said Peyton grimly, "nor will they dare to do it as long as I live to fight them."

"But," persisted Clarence, with the same singular hesitancy of manner, "why did n't you purchase possession of

at least that part of the land which lies so dangerously near your own house?"

"Because it was held by squatters, who naturally preferred buying what might prove a legal title to their land from these impostors than to sell out their possession to *me* at a fair price."

"But couldn't you have bought from them both?" continued Clarence.

"My dear Clarence, I am not a Crœsus nor a fool. Only a man who was both would attempt to treat with these rascals, who would now, of course, insist that *their whole* claim should be bought up at their own price by the man who was most concerned in defeating them."

He turned away a little impatiently. Fortunately he did not observe that Clarence's averted face was crimson with embarrassment, and that a faint smile hovered nervously about his mouth.

Since his late rendezvous with Susy, Clarence had had no chance to interrogate her further regarding her mysterious relative. That that shadowy presence was more or less exaggerated, if not an absolute myth, he more than half suspected, but of the discontent that had produced it, or the recklessness it might provoke, there was no doubt. She might be tempted to some act of folly. He wondered if Mary Rogers knew it. Yet, with his sensitive ideas of loyalty, he would have shrunk from any confidence with Mary regarding her friend's secrets, although he fancied that Mary's dark eyes sometimes dwelt upon him with mournful consciousness and premonition. He did not imagine the truth, that this romantic contemplation was only the result of Mary's conviction that Susy was utterly unworthy of his love. It so chanced one morning that the vaquero who brought the post from Santa Inez arrived earlier than usual, and so anticipated the two girls, who usually made a youthful point of meeting him first as h-

passed the garden wall. The letter bag was consequently delivered to Mrs. Peyton in the presence of the others, and a look of consternation passed between the young girls. But Mary quickly seized upon the bag as if with girlish and mischievous impatience, opened it, and glanced within it.

"There are only three letters for you," she said, handing them to Clarence, with a quick look of significance, which he failed to comprehend, "and nothing for me or Susy."

"But," began the innocent Clarence, as his first glance at the letters showed him that one was directed to Susy, "here is" —

A wicked pinch on his arm that was nearest Mary stopped his speech, and he quickly put the letters in his pocket.

"Did n't you understand that Susy don't want her mother to see that letter?" asked Mary impatiently, when they were alone a moment later.

"No," said Clarence simply, handing her the missive.

Mary took it and turned it over in her hands.

"It 's in a man's handwriting," she said innocently.

"I had n't noticed it," returned Clarence, with invincible *naïveté*, "but perhaps it is."

"And you hand it over for me to give to Susy, and ain't a bit curious to know who it 's from?"

"No," returned Clarence, opening his big eyes in smiling and apologetic wonder.

"Well," responded the young lady, with a long breath of melancholy astonishment, "certainly, of all things you are — you really *are!*" With which incoherency — apparently perfectly intelligible to herself — she left him. She had not herself the slightest idea who the letter was from; she only knew that Susy wanted it concealed.

The incident made little impression on Clarence, except as part of the general uneasiness he felt in regard to his

old playmate. It seemed so odd to him that this worry should come from *her*, — that she herself should form the one discordant note in the Arcadian dream that he had found so sweet; in his previous imaginings it was the presence of Mrs. Peyton which he had dreaded; she whose propinquity now seemed so full of gentleness, reassurance, and repose. How worthy she seemed of any sacrifice he could make for her! He had seen little of her for the last two or three days, although her smile and greeting were always ready for him. Poor Clarence did not dream that she had found from certain incontestable signs and tokens, both in the young ladies and himself, that he did not require watching, and that becoming more resigned to Susy's indifference, which seemed so general and passive in quality, she was no longer tortured by the sting of jealousy.

Finding himself alone that afternoon, the young man had wandered somewhat listlessly beyond the low adobe gateway. The habits of the siesta obtained in a modified form at the rancho. After luncheon, its masters and employees usually retired, not so much from the torrid heat of the afternoon sun, but from the first harrying of the afternoon trades, whose monotonous whistle swept round the walls. A straggling passion-vine near the gate beat and struggled against the wind. Clarence had stopped near it, and was gazing with worried abstraction across the tossing fields, when a soft voice called his name.

It was a pleasant voice, — Mrs. Peyton's. He glanced back at the gateway; it was empty. He looked quickly to the right and left: no one was there.

The voice spoke again with the musical addition of a laugh; it seemed to come from the passion-vine. Ah, yes; behind it, and half overgrown by its branches, was a long, narrow embrasured opening in the wall, defended by the usual Spanish grating, and still further back, as in

the frame of a picture, the half length figure of Mrs. Peyton, very handsome and striking, too, with a painted picturesqueness from the effect of the checkered light and shade.

"You looked so tired and bored out there," she said. "I am afraid you are finding it very dull at the rancho. The prospect is certainly not very enlivening from where you stand."

Clarence protested with a visible pleasure in his eyes, as he held back a spray before the opening.

"If you are not afraid of being worse bored, come in here and talk with me. You have never seen this part of the house, I think, — my own sitting-room. You reach it from the hall in the gallery. But Lola or Anita will show you the way."

He reëntered the gateway, and quickly found the hall, — a narrow, arched passage, whose black, tunnel-like shadows were absolutely unaffected by the vivid, colorless glare of the courtyard without, seen through an opening at the end. The contrast was sharp, blinding, and distinct; even the edges of the opening were black; the outer light halted on the threshold and never penetrated within. The warm odor of verbena and dried rose leaves stole from a half-open door somewhere in the cloistered gloom. Guided by it, Clarence presently found himself on the threshold of a low-vaulted room. Two other narrow embrasured windows like the one he had just seen, and a fourth, wider latticed casement, hung with gauze curtains, suffused the apartment with a clear, yet mysterious twilight that seemed its own. The gloomy walls were warmed by bright-fringed bookshelves, topped with trifles of light feminine coloring and adornment. Low easy-chairs and a lounge, small fanciful tables, a dainty desk, gayly colored baskets of worsteds or mysterious kaleidoscopic fragments, and vases of flowers pervaded the apartment with a mingled sense of

grace and comfort. There was a womanly refinement in its careless negligence, and even the delicate wrapper of Japanese silk, gathered at the waist and falling in easy folds to the feet of the graceful mistress of this charming disorder, looked a part of its refined abandonment.

Clarence hesitated as on the threshold of some sacred shrine. But Mrs. Peyton, with her own hands, cleared a space for him on the lounge.

"You will easily suspect from all this disorder, Mr. Brant, that I spend a greater part of my time here, and that I seldom see much company. Mr. Peyton occasionally comes in long enough to stumble over a footstool or upset a vase, and I think Mary and Susy avoid it from a firm conviction that there is work concealed in these baskets. But I have my books here, and in the afternoons, behind these thick walls, one forgets the incessant stir and restlessness of the dreadful winds outside. Just now you were foolish enough to tempt them while you were nervous, or worried, or listless. Take my word for it, it 's a great mistake. There is no more use fighting them, as I tell Mr. Peyton, than of fighting the people born under them. I have my own opinion that these winds were sent only to stir this lazy race of mongrels into activity, but they are enough to drive us Anglo-Saxons into nervous frenzy. Don't you think so? But you are young and energetic, and perhaps you are not affected by them."

She spoke pleasantly and playfully, yet with a certain nervous tension of voice and manner that seemed to illustrate her theory. At least, Clarence, in quick sympathy with her slightest emotion, was touched by it. There is no more insidious attraction in the persons we admire than the belief that we know and understand their unhappiness, and that our admiration for them is lifted higher than a mere mutual instinctive sympathy with beauty or strength. This adorable woman had suffered. The very

thought aroused his chivalry. It loosened, also, I fear, his quick, impulsive tongue.

Oh yes; he knew it. He had lived under this whip of air and sky for three years, alone in a Spanish rancho, with only the native peons around him, and scarcely speaking his own tongue even to his guardian. He spent his mornings on horseback in fields like these, until the *vientos generales*, as they called them, sprang up and drove him nearly frantic; and his only relief was to bury himself among the books in his guardian's library, and shut out the world, — just as she did. The smile which hovered around the lady's mouth at that moment arrested Clarence, with a quick remembrance of their former relative positions, and a sudden conviction of his familiarity in suggesting an equality of experience, and he blushed. But Mrs. Peyton diverted his embarrassment with an air of interested absorption in his story, and said: —

"Then you know these people thoroughly, Mr. Brant? I am afraid that *we* do not."

Clarence had already gathered that fact within the last few days, and, with his usual impulsive directness, said so. A slight knitting of Mrs. Peyton's brows passed off, however, as he quickly and earnestly went on to say that it was impossible for the Peytons in their present relations to the natives to judge them, or to be judged by them fairly. How they were a childlike race, credulous and trustful, but, like all credulous and trustful people, given to retaliate when imposed upon with a larger insincerity, exaggeration, and treachery. How they had seen their houses and lands occupied by strangers, their religion scorned, their customs derided, their partiarchal society invaded by hollow civilization or frontier brutality — all this fortified by incident and illustration, the outcome of some youthful experience, and given with the glowing enthusiasm of conviction. Mrs. Peyton listened with the

usual divided feminine interest between subject and speaker.

Where did this rough, sullen boy — as she had known him — pick up this delicate and swift perception, this reflective judgment, and this odd felicity of expression? It was not possible that it was in him while he was the companion of her husband's servants or the recognized "chum" of the scamp Hooker. No. But if *he* could have changed like this, why not Susy? Mrs. Peyton, in the conservatism of her sex, had never been quite free from fears of her adopted daughter's hereditary instincts; but, with this example before her, she now took heart. Perhaps the change was coming slowly; perhaps even now what she thought was indifference and coldness was only some abnormal preparation or condition. But she only smiled and said: —

"Then, if you think those people have been wronged, you are not on our side, Mr. Brant?"

What to an older and more worldly man would have seemed, and probably was, only a playful reproach, struck Clarence deeply, and brought his pent-up feelings to his lips.

"*You* have never wronged them. You could n't do it; it is n't in your nature. I am on *your* side, and for you and yours always, Mrs. Peyton. From the first time I saw you on the plains, when I was brought, a ragged boy, before you by your husband, I think I would gladly have laid down my life for you. I don't mind telling you now that I was even jealous of poor Susy, so anxious was I for the smallest share in your thoughts, if only for a moment. You could have done anything with me you wished, and I should have been happy, — far happier than I have been ever since. I tell you this, Mrs. Peyton, now, because you have just doubted if I might be 'on your side,' but I have been longing to tell it all to you before, and it is

that I am ready to do anything you want, — all you want, — to be on *your side* and *at your side*, now and forever."

He was so earnest and hearty, and above all so appallingly and blissfully happy, in this relief of his feelings, smiling as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and so absurdly unconscious of his twenty-two years, his little brown curling mustache, the fire in his wistful, yearning eyes, and, above all, of his clasped hands and lover-like attitude, that Mrs. Peyton — at first rigid as stone, then suffused to the eyes — cast a hasty glance round the apartment, put her handkerchief to her face, and laughed like a girl.

At which Clarence, by no means discomposed, but rather accepting her emotion as perfectly natural, joined her heartily, and added: —

"It's so, Mrs. Peyton; I'm glad I told you. You don't mind it, do you?"

But Mrs. Peyton had resumed her gravity, and perhaps a touch of her previous misgivings.

"I should certainly be very sorry," she said, looking at him critically, "to object to your sharing your old friendship for your little playmate with her parents and guardians, or to your expressing it to *them* as frankly as to her."

She saw the quick change in his mobile face and the momentary arrest of its happy expression. She was frightened and yet puzzled. It was not the sensitiveness of a lover at the mention of the loved one's name, and yet it suggested an uneasy consciousness. If his previous impulsive outburst had been prompted honestly, or even artfully, by his passion for Susy, why had he looked so shocked when she spoke of her?

But Clarence, whose emotion had been caused by the sudden recall of his knowledge of Susy's own disloyalty to the woman whose searching eyes were upon him, in his revulsion against the deceit was, for an instant, upon the

point of divulging all. Perhaps, if Mrs. Peyton had shown more confidence, he would have done so, and materially altered the evolution of this story. But, happily, it is upon these slight human weaknesses that your romancer depends, and Clarence, with no other reason than the instinctive sympathy of youth with youth in its opposition to wisdom and experience, let the opportunity pass, and took the responsibility of it out of the hands of this chronicler.

Howbeit, to cover his confusion, he seized upon the second idea that was in his mind, and stammered, "Susy! Yes, I wanted to speak to you about her." Mrs. Peyton held her breath, but the young man went on, although hesitatingly, with evident sincerity. "Have you heard from any of her relations since — since — you adopted her?"

It seemed a natural enough question, although not the *sequitur* she had expected. "No," she said carelessly. "It was well understood, after the nearest relation — an aunt by marriage — had signed her consent to Susy's adoption, that there should be no further intercourse with the family. There seemed to us no necessity for reopening the past, and Susy herself expressed no desire." She stopped, and again fixing her handsome eyes on Clarence, said, "Do you know any of them?"

But Clarence by this time had recovered himself, and was able to answer carelessly and truthfully that he did not. Mrs. Peyton, still regarding him closely, added somewhat deliberately, "It matters little now what relations she has; Mr. Peyton and I have complete legal control over her until she is of age, and we can easily protect her from any folly of her own or others, or from any of the foolish fancies that sometimes overtake girls of her age and inexperience."

To her utter surprise, however, Clarence uttered a faint

sigh of relief, and his face again recovered its expression of boyish happiness. "I 'm glad of it, Mrs. Peyton," he said heartily. "No one could understand better what is for her interest in all things than yourself. Not," he said, with hasty and equally hearty loyalty to his old playmate, "that I think she would ever go against your wishes, or do anything that she knows to be wrong, but she is very young and innocent, — as much of a child as ever, don't you think so, Mrs. Peyton?"

It was amusing, yet nevertheless puzzling, to hear this boyish young man comment upon Susy's girlishness. And Clarence was serious, for he had quite forgotten in Mrs. Peyton's presence the impression of superiority which Susy had lately made upon him. But Mrs. Peyton returned to the charge, or, rather, to an attack upon what she conceived to be Clarence's old position.

"I suppose she does seem girlish compared to Mary Rogers, who is a much more reserved and quiet nature. But Mary is very charming, Mr. Brant, and I am really delighted to have her here with Susy. She has such lovely dark eyes and such good manners. She has been well brought up, and it is easy to see that her friends are superior people. I must write to them to thank them for her visit, and beg them to let her stay longer. I think you said you did n't know them?"

But Clarence, whose eyes had been thoughtfully and admiringly wandering over every characteristic detail of the charming apartment, here raised them to its handsome mistress, with an apologetic air and a "No" of such unaffected and complete abstraction, that she was again dumfounded. Certainly, it could not be Mary in whom he was interested.

Abandoning any further inquisition for the present, she let the talk naturally fall upon the books scattered about the tables. The young man knew them all far better than

she did, with a cognate knowledge of others of which she had never heard. She found herself in the attitude of receiving information from this boy, whose boyishness, however, seemed to have evaporated, whose tone had changed with the subject, and who now spoke with the conscious reserve of knowledge. Decidedly, she must have grown rusty in her seclusion. This came, she thought bitterly, of living alone; of her husband's preoccupation with the property; of Susy's frivolous caprices. At the end of eight years to be outstripped by a former cattle-boy of her husband's, and to have her French corrected in a matter-of-fact way by this recent pupil of the priests, was really too bad! Perhaps he even looked down upon Susy! She smiled dangerously but suavely.

"You must have worked *so* hard to educate yourself from nothing, Mr. Brant. You couldn't read, I think, when you first came to us. No? Could you really? I know it has been very difficult for Susy to get on with her studies in proportion. We had so much to first eradicate in the way of manners, style, and habits of thought which the poor child had picked up from her companions, and for which *she* was not responsible. Of course, with a boy that does not signify," she added, with feline gentleness.

But the barbed speech glanced from the young man's smoothly smiling abstraction.

"Ah, yes. But those were happy days, Mrs. Peyton," he answered, with an exasperating return of his previous boyish enthusiasm, "perhaps because of our ignorance. I don't think that Susy and I are any happier for knowing that the plains are not as flat as we believed they were, and that the sun does n't have to burn a hole in them every night when it sets. But I know I believed that *you* knew everything. When I once saw you smiling over a book in your hand, I thought it must be a different

one from any that I had ever seen, and perhaps made expressly for you. I can see you there still. Do you know," quite confidentially, "that you reminded me — of course *you* were much younger — of what I remembered of my mother?"

But Mrs. Peyton's reply of "Ah, indeed," albeit polite, indicated some coldness and lack of animation. Clarence rose quickly, but cast a long and lingering look around him.

"You will come again, Mr. Brant," said the lady more graciously. "If you are going to ride now, perhaps you would try to meet Mr. Peyton. He is late already, and I am always uneasy when he is out alone, — particularly on one of those half-broken horses, which they consider good enough for riding here. *You* have ridden them before and understand them, but I am afraid that 's another thing *we* have got to learn."

When the young man found himself again confronting the glittering light of the courtyard, he remembered the interview and the soft twilight of the boudoir only as part of a pleasant dream. There was a rude awakening in the fierce wind, which had increased with the lengthening shadows. It seemed to sweep away the half-sensuous comfort that had pervaded him, and made him coldly realize that he had done nothing to solve the difficulties of his relations to Susy. He had lost the one chance of confiding to Mrs. Peyton, — if he had ever really intended to do so. It was impossible for him to do it hereafter without a confession of prolonged deceit.

He reached the stables impatiently, where his attention was attracted by the sound of excited voices in the corral. Looking within, he was concerned to see that one of the vaqueros was holding the dragging bridle of a blown, dusty, and foam-covered horse, around whom a dozen idlers were gathered. Even beneath its coating of dust and foam

and the half-displaced saddle blanket, Clarence immediately recognized the spirited pinto mustang which Peyton had ridden that morning.

"What 's the matter?" said Clarence, from the gateway.

The men fell apart, glancing at each other. One said quickly in Spanish: —

"Say nothing to *him*. It is an affair of the house."

But this brought Clarence down like a bombshell among them, not to be overlooked in his equal command of their tongue and of them. "Ah! come, now. What drunken piggishness is this? Speak!"

"The padron has been — perhaps — thrown," stammered the first speaker. "His horse arrives, — but he does not. We go to inform the señora."

"No, you don't! mules and imbeciles! Do you want to frighten her to death? Mount, every one of you, and follow me!"

The men hesitated, but for only a moment. Clarence had a fine assortment of Spanish epithets, expletives, and objurgations, gathered in his rodeo experience at El Refugio, and laid them about him with such fervor and discrimination that two or three mules, presumably with guilty consciences, mistaking their direction, actually cowered against the stockade of the corral in fear. In another moment the vaqueros had hastily mounted, and, with Clarence at their head, were dashing down the road towards Santa Inez. Here he spread them in open order in the grain, on either side of the track, himself taking the road.

They did not proceed very far. For when they had reached the gradual slope which marked the decline to the second terrace, Clarence, obeying an instinct as irresistible as it was unaccountable, which for the last few moments had been forcing itself upon him, ordered a halt. The casa and corral had already sunk in the plain behind them;

it was the spot where the lasso had been thrown at him a few evenings before! Bidding the men converge slowly towards the road, he went on more cautiously, with his eyes upon the track before him. Presently he stopped. There was a ragged displacement of the cracked and crumbling soil and the unmistakable scoop of kicking hoofs. As he stooped to examine them, one of the men at the right uttered a shout. By the same strange instinct Clarence knew that Peyton was found!

He was, indeed, lying there among the wild oats at the right of the road, but without trace of life or scarcely human appearance. His clothes, where not torn and shredded away, were partly turned inside out; his shoulders, neck, and head were a shapeless, undistinguishable mask of dried earth and rags, like a mummy-wrapping. His left boot was gone. His large frame seemed boneless, and, except for the cerements of his mud-stiffened clothing, was limp and sodden.

Clarence raised his head suddenly from a quick examination of the body, and looked at the men around him. One of them was already cantering away. Clarence instantly threw himself on his horse, and, putting spurs to the animal, drew a revolver from his holster and fired over the man's head. The rider turned in his saddle, saw his pursuer, and pulled up.

"Go back," said Clarence, "or my next shot won't *miss* you."

"I was only going to inform the señora," said the man, with a shrug and a forced smile.

"*I* will do that," said Clarence grimly, driving him back with him into the waiting circle; then turning to them he said slowly, with deliberate, smileless irony, "And now, my brave gentlemen, — knights of the bull and gallant mustang hunters, — *I* want to inform *you* that I believe that Mr. Peyton was *murdered*, and if the man

who killed him is anywhere this side of hell, *I* intend to find him. Good! You understand me! Now lift up the body, — you two, by the shoulders; you two, by the feet. Let your horses follow. For I intend that you four shall carry home your master in your arms, on foot. Now forward to the corral by the back trail. Disobey me, or step out of line and" — He raised the revolver ominously.

If the change wrought in the dead man before them was weird and terrifying, no less distinct and ominous was the change that, during the last few minutes, had come over the living speaker. For it was no longer the youthful Clarence who sat there, but a haggard, prematurely worn, desperate-looking avenger, lank of cheek, and injected of eye, whose white teeth glistened under the brown mustache and thin pale lips that parted when his restrained breath now and then hurriedly escaped them.

As the procession moved on, two men slunk behind with the horses.

"Mother of God! Who is this wolf's whelp?" said Manuel.

"Hush!" said his companion in a terrified whisper. "Have you not heard? It is the son of Hamilton Brant, the assassin, the duelist, — he who was fusiladed in Soñora." He made the sign of the cross quickly. "Jesus Maria! Let them look out who have cause, for the blood of his father is in him!"

CHAPTER VII

What other speech passed between Clarence and Peyton's retainers was not known, but not a word of the interview seemed to have been divulged by those present. It was generally believed and accepted that Judge Peyton met his death by being thrown from his half-broken mustang, and dragged at its heels, and medical opinion, hastily summoned from Santa Inez after the body had been borne to the corral, and stripped of its hideous encasings, declared that the neck had been broken, and death had followed instantaneously. An inquest was deemed unnecessary.

Clarence had selected Mary to break the news to Mrs. Peyton, and the frightened young girl was too much struck with the change still visible in his face, and the half authority of his manner, to decline, or even to fully appreciate the calamity that had befallen them. After the first benumbing shock, Mrs. Peyton passed into that strange exaltation of excitement brought on by the immediate necessity for action, followed by a pallid calm, which the average spectator too often unfairly accepts as incongruous, inadequate, or artificial. There had also occurred one of those strange compensations that wait on Death or disrupture by catastrophe: such as the rude shaking down of an unsettled life, the forcible realization of what were vague speculations, the breaking of old habits and traditions, and the unloosing of half-conscious bonds. Mrs. Peyton, without insensibility to her loss or disloyalty to her affections, nevertheless felt a relief to know that she was now really

Susy's guardian, free to order her new life wherever and under what conditions she chose as most favorable to it, and that she could dispose of this house that was wearying to her when Susy was away, and which the girl herself had always found insupportable. She could settle this question of Clarence's relations to her daughter out of hand without advice or opposition. She had a brother in the East, who would be summoned to take care of the property. This consideration for the living pursued her, even while the dead man's presence still awed the hushed house; it was in her thoughts as she stood beside his bier and adjusted the flowers on his breast, which no longer moved for or against these vanities; and it stayed with her even in the solitude of her darkened room.

But if Mrs. Peyton was deficient, it was Susy who filled the popular idea of a mourner, and whose emotional attitude of a grief-stricken daughter left nothing to be desired. It was she who, when the house was filled with sympathizing friends from San Francisco and the few near neighbors who had hurried with condolences, was overflowing in her reminiscences of the dead man's goodness to her, and her own undying affection; who recalled ominous things that he had said, and strange premonitions of her own, the result of her ever-present filial anxiety; it was she who had hurried home that afternoon, impelled with vague fears of some impending calamity; it was she who drew a picture of Peyton as a doting and almost too indulgent parent, which Mary Rogers failed to recognize, and which brought back vividly to Clarence's recollection her own childish exaggerations of the Indian massacre. I am far from saying that she was entirely insincere or merely acting at these moments; at times she was taken with a mild hysteria, brought on by the exciting intrusion of this real event in her monotonous life, by the attentions of her friends, the importance of her suffering as an only child,

and the advancement of her position as the heiress of the Robles Rancho. If her tears were near the surface, they were at least genuine, and filmed her violet eyes and reddened her pretty eyelids quite as effectually as if they had welled from the depths of her being. Her black frock lent a matured dignity to her figure, and paled her delicate complexion with the refinement of suffering. Even Clarence was moved in that dark and haggard abstraction that had settled upon him since his strange outbreak over the body of his old friend.

The extent of that change had not been noticed by Mrs. Peyton, who had only observed that Clarence had treated her grief with a grave and silent respect. She was grateful for that. A repetition of his boyish impulsiveness would have been distasteful to her at such a moment. She only thought him more mature and more subdued, and as the only man now in her household his services had been invaluable in the emergency.

The funeral had taken place at Santa Inez, where half the county gathered to pay their last respects to their former fellow citizen and neighbor, whose legal and combative victories they had admired, and whom death had lifted into a public character. The family were returning to the house the same afternoon, Mrs. Peyton and the girls in one carriage, the female house-servants in another, and Clarence on horseback. They had reached the first plateau, and Clarence was riding a little in advance, when an extraordinary figure, rising from the grain beyond, began to gesticulate to him wildly. Checking the driver of the first carriage, Clarence bore down upon the stranger. To his amazement it was Jim Hooker. Mounted on a peaceful, unwieldy plough horse, he was nevertheless accoutred and armed after his most extravagant fashion. In addition to a heavy rifle across his saddle-bow he was weighted down with a knife and revolvers. Clarence was

in no mood for trifling, and almost rudely demanded his business.

"Gord, Clarence, it ain't foolin'. The Sisters' title was decided yesterday."

"I knew it, you fool! It 's *your* title! You were already on your land and in possession. What the devil are you doing *here?*"

"Yes, — but," stammered Jim, "all the boys holding that title moved up here to 'make the division' and grab all they could. And I followed. And I found out that they were going to grab Judge Peyton's house, because it was on the line, if they could, and findin' you was all away, by Gord *they did!* and they 're in it! And I stoled out and rode down here to warn ye."

He stopped, looked at Clarence, glanced darkly around him and then down on his accoutrements. Even in that supreme moment of sincerity, he could not resist the possibilities of the situation.

"It 's as much as my life 's worth," he said gloomily. "But," with a dark glance at his weapons, "I 'll sell it dearly."

"Jim!" said Clarence in a terrible voice, "you 're not lying again?"

"No," said Jim hurriedly. "I swear it, Clarence! No! Honest Injin this time. And look. I 'll help you. They ain't expectin' you yet, and they think ye 'll come by the road. Ef I raised a scare off there by the corral, while you 're creepin' *round by the back*, mebbe you could get in while they 're all lookin' for ye in front, don't you see? I 'll raise a big row, and they need n't know but what ye 've got wind of it and brought a party with you from Santa Inez."

In a flash Clarence had wrought a feasible plan out of Jim's fantasy.

"Good," he said, wringing his old companion's hand.

"Go back quietly now; hang round the corral, and when you see the carriage climbing the last terrace raise your alarm. Don't mind how loud it is, there 'll be nobody but the servants in the carriages."

He rode quickly back to the first carriage, at whose window Mrs. Peyton's calm face was already questioning him. He told her briefly and concisely of the attack, and what he proposed to do.

"You have shown yourself so strong in matters of worse moment than this," he added quietly, "that I have no fears for your courage. I have only to ask you to trust yourself to me, to put you back at once in your own home. Your presence there, just now, is the one important thing, whatever happens afterwards."

She recognized his maturer tone and determined manner, and nodded assent. More than that, a faint fire came into her handsome eyes; the two girls kindled their own at that flaming beacon, and sat with flushed cheeks and suspended, indignant breath. They were Western Americans, and not over much used to imposition.

"You must get down before we raise the hill, and follow me on foot through the grain. I was thinking," he added, turning to Mrs. Peyton, "of your boudoir window."

She had been thinking of it, too, and nodded.

"The vine has loosened the bars," he said.

"If it has n't, we must squeeze through them," she returned simply.

At the end of the terrace Clarence dismounted, and helped them from the carriage. He then gave directions to the coachmen to follow the road slowly to the corral in front of the casa, and tied his horse behind the second carriage. Then, with Mrs. Peyton and the two young girls, he plunged into the grain.

It was hot, it was dusty; their thin shoes slipped in the crumbling adobe, and the great blades caught in their

crape draperies, but they uttered no complaint. Whatever ulterior thought was in their minds, they were bent only on one thing at that moment, — on entering the house at any hazard. Mrs. Peyton had lived long enough on the frontier to know the magic power of *possession*. Susy already was old enough to feel the acute feminine horror of the profanation of her own belongings by alien hands. Clarence, more cognizant of the whole truth than the others, was equally silent and determined; and Mary Rogers was fired with the zeal of loyalty.

Suddenly a series of blood-curdling yells broke from the direction of the corral, and they stopped. But Clarence at once recognized the well-known war-whoop imitation of Jim Hooker, — infinitely more gruesome and appalling than the genuine aboriginal challenge. A half dozen shots fired in quick succession had evidently the same friendly origin.

"Now is our time," said Clarence eagerly. "We must run for the house."

They had fortunately reached by this time the angle of the adobe wall of the casa, and the long afternoon shadows of the building were in their favor. They pressed forward eagerly with the sounds of Jim Hooker's sham encounter still in their ears, mingled with answering shouts of defiance from strange voices within the building towards the front.

They rapidly skirted the wall, even passing boldly before the back gateway, which seemed empty and deserted, and the next moment stood beside the narrow window of the boudoir. Clarence's surmises were correct; the iron grating was not only loose, but yielded to a vigorous wrench, the vine itself acting as a lever to pull out the rusty bars. The young man held out his hand, but Mrs. Peyton, with the sudden agility of a young girl, leaped into the window, followed by Mary and Susy. The inner

casement yielded to her touch; the next moment they were within the room. Then Mrs. Peyton's flushed and triumphant face reappeared at the window.

"It 's all right; the men are all in the courtyard, or in the front of the house. The boudoir door is strong, and we can bolt them out."

"It won't be necessary," said Clarence quietly; "you will not be disturbed."

"But are you not coming in?" she asked timidly, holding the window open.

Clarence looked at her with his first faint smile since Peyton's death.

"Of course I am, but not in *that* way. I am going in by *the front gate.*"

She would have detained him, but, with a quick wave of his hand, he left her, and ran swiftly around the wall of the casa toward the front. The gate was half open; a dozen excited men were gathered before it and in the archway, and among them, whitened with dust, blackened with powder, and apparently glutted with rapine, and still holding a revolver in his hand, was Jim Hooker! As Clarence approached, the men quickly retreated inside the gate and closed it, but not before he had exchanged a meaning glance with Jim. When he reached the gate, a man from within roughly demanded his business.

"I wish to see the leader of this party," said Clarence quietly.

"I reckon you do," returned the man, with a short laugh. "But I kalkilate *he* don't return the compliment."

"He probably will when he reads this note to his employer," continued Clarence still coolly, selecting a paper from his pocket-book. It was addressed to Francisco Robles, Superintendent of the Sisters' Title, and directed him to give Mr. Clarence Brant free access to the property and the fullest information concerning it. The man took

it, glanced at it, looked again at Clarence, and then passed the paper to a third man among the group in the courtyard. The latter read it, and approached the gate carelessly.

"Well, what do you want?"

"I am afraid you have the advantage of me in being able to transact business through bars," said Clarence, with slow but malevolent distinctness, "and as mine is important, I think you had better open the gate to me."

The slight laugh that his speech had evoked from the bystanders was checked as the leader retorted angrily: —

"That 's all very well; but how do I know that you 're the man represented in that letter? Pancho Robles may know you, but *I* don't."

"That you can find out very easily," said Clarence. "There is a man among your party who knows me, — Mr. Hooker. Ask him."

The man turned, with a quick mingling of surprise and suspicion, to the gloomy, imperturbable Hooker. Clarence could not hear the reply of that young gentleman, but it was evidently not wanting in his usual dark, enigmatical exaggeration. The man surlily opened the gate.

"All the same," he said, still glancing suspiciously at Hooker, "I don't see what *he 's* got to do with you."

"A great deal," said Clarence, entering the courtyard, and stepping into the veranda; "*he 's one of my tenants.*"

"Your *what?*" said the man, with a coarse laugh of incredulity.

"My tenants," repeated Clarence, glancing around the courtyard carelessly. Nevertheless, he was relieved to notice that the three or four Mexicans of the party did not seem to be old retainers of the rancho. There was no evidence of the internal treachery he had feared.

"Your *tenants!*" echoed the man, with an uneasy glance at the faces of the others.

"Yes," said Clarence, with business brevity; "and, for the matter of that, although I have no reason to be particularly proud of it, *so are you all.* You ask my business here. It seems to be the same as yours, — to hold possession of this house! With this difference, however," he continued, taking a document from his pocket. "Here is the certificate, signed by the County Clerk, of the bill of sale of the entire Sisters' title to *me.* It includes the whole two leagues from Fair Plains to the old boundary line of this rancho, which you forcibly entered this morning. There is the document; examine it if you like. The only shadow of a claim you could have to this property you would have to derive from *me.* The only excuse you could have for this act of lawlessness would be orders from *me.* And all that you have done this morning is only the assertion of *my* legal right to this house. If I disavow your act, as I might, I leave you as helpless as any tramp that was ever kicked from a doorstep, — as any burglar that was ever collared on the fence by a constable."

It was the truth. There was no denying the authority of the document, the facts of the situation, or its ultimate power and significance. There was consternation, stupefaction, and even a half-humorous recognition of the absurdity of their position on most of the faces around him. Incongruous as the scene was, it was made still more grotesque by the attitude of Jim Hooker. Ruthlessly abandoning the party of convicted trespassers, he stalked gloomily over to the side of Clarence, with the air of having been all the time scornfully in the secret and a mien of wearied victoriousness, and thus halting, he disdainfully expectorated tobacco juice on the ground between him and his late companions, as if to form a line of demarcation. The few Mexicans began to edge towards the gateway. This defection of his followers recalled the leader, who was no coward, to himself again.

"Shut the gate, there!" he shouted.

As its two sides clashed together again, he turned deliberately to Clarence.

"That 's all very well, young man, as regards the *title.* You may have *bought* up the land, and legally own every square inch of howling wilderness between this and San Francisco, and I wish you joy of your d—d fool's bargain; you may have got a whole circus like that," pointing to the gloomy Jim, "at your back. But with all your money and all your friends you 've forgotten one thing. You have n't got possession, and we have."

"That 's just where we differ," said Clarence coolly, "for if you take the trouble to examine the house, you will see that it is already in possession of Mrs. Peyton, — *my tenant.*"

He paused to give effect to his revelations. But he was, nevertheless, unprepared for an unrehearsed dramatic situation. Mrs. Peyton, who had been tired of waiting, and was listening in the passage, at the mention of her name, entered the gallery, followed by the young ladies. The slight look of surprise upon her face, at the revelation she had just heard of Clarence's ownership, only gave the suggestion of her having been unexpectedly disturbed in her peaceful seclusion. One of the Mexicans turned pale, with a frightened glance at the passage, as if he expected the figure of the dead man to follow.

The group fell back. The game was over, — and lost. No one recognized it more quickly than the gamblers themselves. More than that, desperate and lawless as they were, they still retained the chivalry of Western men, and every hat was slowly doffed to the three black figures that stood silently in the gallery. And even apologetic speech began to loosen the clenched teeth of the discomfited leader.

"We — were — told there was no one in the house," he stammered.

"And it was the truth," said a pert, youthful, yet slightly affected voice. "For we climbed into the window just as you came in at the gate."

It was Susy's words that stung their ears again; but it was Susy's pretty figure, suddenly advanced and in a slightly theatrical attitude, that checked their anger. There had been a sudden ominous silence, as the whole plot of rescue seemed to be revealed to them in those audacious words. But a sense of the ludicrous, which too often was the only perception that ever mitigated the passions of such assemblies, here suddenly asserted itself. The leader burst into a loud laugh, which was echoed by the others, and, with waving hats, the whole party swept peacefully out through the gate.

"But what does all this mean about *your* purchasing the land, Mr. Brant?" said Mrs. Peyton quickly, fixing her eyes intently on Clarence.

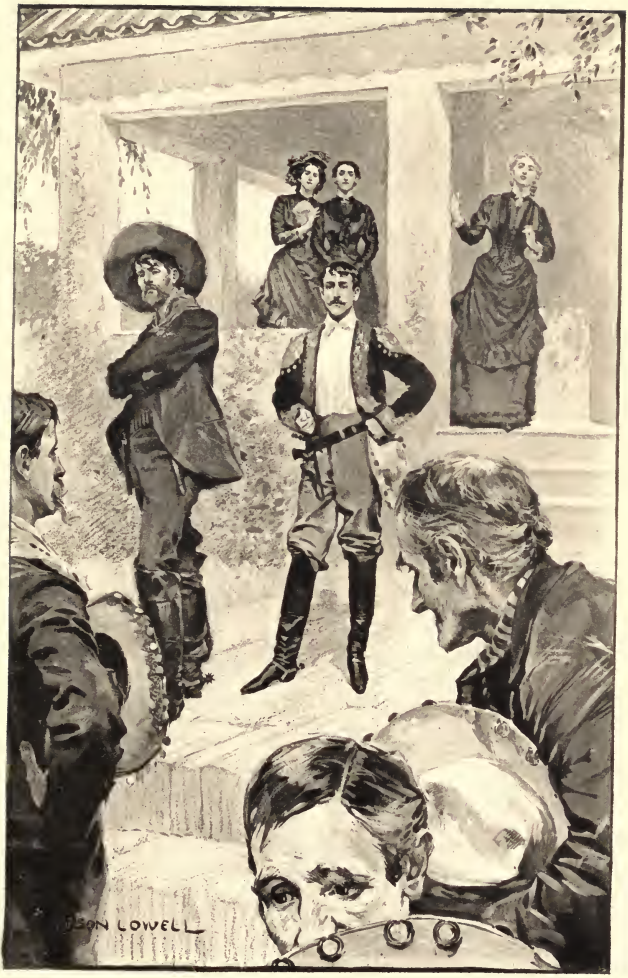
A faint color — the useless protest of his truthful blood — came to his cheek.

"The house is *yours*, and yours alone, Mrs. Peyton. The purchase of the Sisters' title was a private arrangement between Mr. Peyton and myself, in view of an emergency like this."

She did not, however, take her proud, searching eyes from his face, and he was forced to turn away.

"It was *so* like dear, good, thoughtful papa," said Susy. "Why, bless me," in a lower voice, "if that is n't that lying old Jim Hooker standing there by the gate!"

And it was the truth


LEON LOWELL

CHAPTER VIII

JUDGE PEYTON had bequeathed his entire property unconditionally to his wife. But his affairs were found to be greatly in disorder, and his papers in confusion, and although Mrs. Peyton could discover no actual record of the late transaction with Mr. Brant, which had saved her the possession of the homestead, it was evident that he had spent large sums in speculative attempts to maintain the integrity of his estate. That enormous domain, although perfectly unencumbered, had been nevertheless unremunerative, partly through the costs of litigation and partly through the systematic depredations to which its great size and long line of unprotected boundary had subjected it. It had been invaded by squatters and "jumpers," who had sown and reaped crops without discovery; its cattle and wild horses had strayed or been driven beyond its ill-defined and hopeless limits. Against these difficulties the widow felt herself unable and unwilling to contend, and with the advice of her friends and her lawyer, she concluded to sell the estate, except that portion covered by the Sisters' title, which, with the homestead, had been reconveyed to her by Clarence. She retired with Susy to the house in San Francisco, leaving Clarence to occupy and hold the casa, with her servants, for her until order was restored. The Robles Rancho thus became the headquarters of the new owner of the Sisters' title, from which he administered its affairs, visited its incumbencies, overlooked and surveyed its lands, and — occasionally — collected its rents. There were not wanting critics

who averred that these were scarcely remunerative, and that the young San Francisco fine gentleman, who was only Hamilton Brant's son, after all, yet who wished to ape the dignity and degree of a large landholder, had made a very foolish bargain. I grieve to say that one of his own tenants, namely, Jim Hooker, in his secret heart inclined to that belief, and looked upon Clarence's speculation as an act of far-seeing and inordinate vanity.

Indeed, the belligerent Jim had partly — and of course darkly — intimated something of this to Susy in their brief reunion at the casa during the few days that followed its successful reoccupation. And Clarence, remembering her older caprices, and her remark on her first recognition of him, was quite surprised at the easy familiarity of her reception of this forgotten companion of their childhood. But he was still more concerned in noticing, for the first time, a singular sympathetic understanding of each other, and an odd similarity of occasional action and expression between them. It was a part of this monstrous peculiarity that neither the sympathy nor the likeness suggested any particular friendship or amity in the pair, but rather a mutual antagonism and suspicion. Mrs. Peyton, coldly polite to Clarence's former *companion*, but condescendingly gracious to his present *tenant* and retainer, did not notice it, preoccupied with the annoyance and pain of Susy's frequent references to the old days of their democratic equality.

"You don't remember, Jim, the time that you painted my face in the wagon, and got me up as an Indian papoose?" she said mischievously.

But Jim, who had no desire to recall his previous humble position before Mrs. Peyton or Clarence, was only vaguely responsive. Clarence, although joyfully touched at this seeming evidence of Susy's loyalty to the past, nevertheless found himself even more acutely pained at the

distress it caused Mrs. Peyton, and was as relieved as she was by Hooker's reticence. For he had seen little of Susy since Peyton's death, and there had been no repetition of their secret interviews. Neither had he, nor she as far as he could judge, noticed the omission. He had been more than usually kind, gentle, and protecting in his manner towards her, with little reference, however, to any response from her, yet he was vaguely conscious of some change in his feelings. He attributed it, when he thought of it at all, to the exciting experiences through which he had passed; to some sentiment of responsibility to his dead friend; and to another secret preoccupation that was always in his mind. He believed it would pass in time. Yet he felt a certain satisfaction that she was no longer able to trouble him, except, of course, when she pained Mrs. Peyton, and then he was half conscious of taking the old attitude of the dead husband in mediating between them. Yet so great was his inexperience that he believed, with pathetic simplicity of perception, that all this was due to the slow maturing of his love for her, and that he was still able to make her happy. But this was something to be thought of later. Just now Providence seemed to have offered him a vocation and a purpose that his idle adolescence had never known. He did not dream that his capacity for patience was only the slow wasting of his love.

Meantime that more wonderful change and recreation of the Californian landscape, so familiar, yet always so young, had come to the rancho. The league-long terrace that had yellowed, whitened, and wasted for half a year beneath a staring, monotonous sky, now under sailing clouds, flying and broken shafts of light, and sharply defined lines of rain, had taken a faint hue of resurrection. The dust that had muffled the roads and byways, and choked the low oaks that fringed the sunken cañada, had long since

been laid. The warm, moist breath of the southwest trades had softened the hard, dry lines of the landscape, and restored its color as of a picture over which a damp sponge had been passed. The broad expanse of plateau before the casa glistened and grew dark. The hidden woods of the cañada, cleared and strengthened in their solitude, dripped along the trails and hollows that were now transformed into running streams. The distinguishing madroño near the entrance to the rancho had changed its crimson summer suit and masqueraded in buff and green.

Yet there were leaden days, when half the prospect seemed to be seen through palisades of rain; when the slight incline between the terraces became a tumultuous cascade, and the surest hoofs slipped on trails of unctuous mud; when cattle were bogged a few yards from the highway, and the crossing of the turnpike road was a dangerous ford. There were days of gale and tempest, when the shriveled stalks of giant oats were stricken like trees, and lay across each other in rigid angles, and a roar as of the sea came up from the writhing treetops in the sunken valley. There were long weary nights of steady downpour, hammering on the red tiles of the casa, and drumming on the shingles of the new veranda, which was more terrible to be borne. Alone, but for the servants, and an occasional storm-stayed tenant from Fair Plains, Clarence might have, at such times, questioned the effect of this seclusion upon his impassioned nature. But he had already been accustomed to monastic seclusion in his boyish life at El Refugio, and he did not reflect that, for that very reason, its indulgences might have been dangerous. From time to time letters reached him from the outer world of San Francisco, — a few pleasant lines from Mrs. Peyton, in answer to his own chronicle of his half stewardship, giving the news of the family, and briefly recounting their movements. She was afraid that Susy's sensitive nature chafed

under the restriction of mourning in the gay city, but she trusted to bring her back for a change to Robles when the rains were over. This was a poor substitute for those brief, happy glimpses of the home circle which had so charmed him, but he accepted it stoically. He wandered over the old house, from which the perfume of domesticity seemed to have evaporated, yet, notwithstanding Mrs. Peyton's playful permission, he never intruded upon the sanctity of the boudoir, and kept it jealously locked.

He was sitting in Peyton's business room one morning, when Incarnacion entered. Clarence had taken a fancy to this Indian, half steward, half vaquero, who had reciprocated it with a certain dog-like fidelity, but also a feline indirectness that was part of his nature. He had been early prepossessed with Clarence through a kinsman at El Refugio, where the young American's generosity had left a romantic record among the common people. He had been pleased to approve of his follies before the knowledge of his profitless and lordly land purchase had commended itself to him as corroborative testimony. "Of true hidalgo blood, mark you," he had said oracularly. "Wherefore was his father sacrificed by mongrels! As to the others, believe me, — bah!"

He stood there, sombrero in hand, murky and confidential, steaming through his soaked serape and exhaling a blended odor of equine perspiration and cigarette smoke.

"It was, perhaps, as the master had noticed, a brigand's own day! Bullying, treacherous, and wicked! It blew you off your horse if you so much as lifted your arms and let the wind get inside your serape; and as for the mud, — caramba! in fifty varas your forelegs were like bears, and your hoofs were earthen plasters!"

Clarence knew that Incarnacion had not sought him with mere meteorological information, and patiently awaited further developments. The vaquero went on: —

"But one of the things this beast of a weather did was to wash down the stalks of the grain, and to clear out the trough and hollows between, and to make level the fields, and — look you! to uncover the stones and rubbish and whatever the summer dust had buried. Indeed, it was even as a miracle that José Mendez one day, after the first showers, came upon a silver button from his calzas, which he had lost in the early summer. And it was only that morning that, remembering how much and with what fire Don Clarencio had sought the missing boot from the foot of the Señor Peyton when his body was found, he, Incarnacion, had thought he would look for it on the falda of the second terrace. And behold, Mother of God! it was there! Soaked with mud and rain, but the same as when the señor was alive. To the very spur!"

He drew the boot from beneath his serape and laid it before Clarence. The young man instantly recognized it, in spite of its weather-beaten condition and its air of grotesque and drunken inconsistency to the usually trim and correct appearance of Peyton when alive. "It is the same," he said, in a low voice.

"Good!" said Incarnacion. "Now, if Don Clarencio will examine the American spur, he will see — what? A few horse-hairs twisted and caught in the sharp points of the rowel. Good! Is it the hair of the horse that Señor rode? Clearly not; and in truth not. It is too long for the flanks and belly of the horse; it is not the same color as the tail and the mane. How comes it there? It comes from the twisted horse-hair rope of a riata, and not from the braided cowhide thongs of the regular lasso of a vaquero. The lasso slips not much, but holds; the riata slips much and strangles."

"But Mr. Peyton was not strangled," said Clarence quickly.

"No, for the noose of the riata was perhaps large, —

who knows? It might have slipped down his arms, pinioned him, and pulled him off. Truly! — such has been known before. Then on the ground it slipped again, or he perhaps worked it off to his feet where it caught on his spur, and then he was dragged until the boot came off, and behold! he was dead."

This had been Clarence's own theory of the murder, but he had only half confided it to Incarnacion. He silently examined the spur with the accusing horse-hair, and placed it in his desk. Incarnacion continued: —

"There is not a vaquero in the whole rancho who has a horse-hair riata. We use the braided cowhide; it is heavier and stronger; it is for the bull and not the man. The horse-hair riata comes from over the range — south."

There was a dead silence, broken only by the drumming of the rain upon the roof of the veranda. Incarnacion slightly shrugged his shoulders.

"Don Clarencio does not know the southern county? Francisco Robles, cousin of the 'Sisters,' — he they call 'Pancho,' — comes from the south. Surely when Don Clarencio bought the title he saw Francisco, for he was the steward?"

"I dealt only with the actual owners and through my bankers in San Francisco," returned Clarence abstractedly.

Incarnacion looked through the yellow corners of his murky eyes at his master.

"Pedro Valdez, who was sent away by Señor Peyton, is the foster-brother of Francisco. They were much together. Now that Francisco is rich from the gold Don Clarencio paid for the title, they come not much together. But Pedro is rich, too. Mother of God! He gambles and is a fine gentleman. He holds his head high, — even over the Americanos he gambles with. Truly, they say he can shoot with the best of them. He boasts and swells himself, this Pedro! He says if all the old families were

like him, they would drive those western swine back over the mountains again."

Clarence raised his eyes, caught a subtle yellow flash from Incarnacion's, gazed at him suddenly, and rose.

"I don't think I have ever seen him," he said quietly. "Thank you for bringing me the spur. But keep the knowledge of it to yourself, good Nascio, for the present."

Nascio nevertheless still lingered. Perceiving which, Clarence handed him a cigarette and proceeded to light one himself. He knew that the vaquero would re-roll his, and that that always deliberate occupation would cover and be an excuse for further confidence.

"The Señora Peyton does not perhaps meet this Pedro in the society of San Francisco?"

"Surely not. The señora is in mourning and goes not out in society, nor would she probably go anywhere where she would meet a dismissed servant of her husband."

Incarnacion slowly lit his cigarette, and said between the puffs, "And the señorita — she would not meet him?"

"Assuredly not."

"And," continued Incarnacion, throwing down the match and putting his foot on it, "if this boaster, this turkey-cock, says she did, you could put him out like that?"

"Certainly," said Clarence, with an easy confidence he was, however, far from feeling, "if he really *said* it — which I doubt."

"Ah, truly," said Incarnacion; "who knows? It may be another Señorita Silsbee."

"The señora's adopted daughter is called *Miss Peyton*, friend Nascio. You forget yourself," said Clarence quietly.

"Ah, pardon!" said Incarnacion with effusive apology; "but she was born Silsbee. Everybody knows it; she herself has told it to Pepita. The Señor Peyton bequeathed his estate to the Señora Peyton. He named not the

señorita! Eh, what would you? It is the common cackle of the barnyard. But *I* say 'Mees Silsbee.' For look you. There is a Silsbee of Sacramento, the daughter of her aunt, who writes letters to her. Pepita has seen them! And possibly it is only that Mees of whom the brigand Pedro boasts."

"Possibly," said Clarence, "but as far as this rancho is concerned, friend Nascio, thou wilt understand — and I look to thee to make the others understand — that there is no Señorita *Silsbee* here, only the Señorita *Peyton*, the respected daughter of the señora thy mistress!" He spoke with the quaint mingling of familiarity and paternal gravity of the Spanish master — a faculty he had acquired at El Refugio in a like vicarious position, and which never failed as a sign of authority. "And now," he added gravely, "get out of this, friend, with God's blessing, and see that thou rememberest what I told thee."

The retainer, with equal gravity, stepped backwards, saluted with his sombrero until the stiff brim scraped the floor, and then solemnly withdrew.

Left to himself, Clarence remained for an instant silent and thoughtful before the oven-like hearth. So! everybody knew Susy's real relations to the Peytons, and everybody but Mrs. Peyton, perhaps, knew that she was secretly corresponding with some one of her own family. In other circumstances he might have found some excuse for this assertion of her independence and love of her kindred, but in her attitude towards Mrs. Peyton it seemed monstrous. It appeared impossible that Mrs. Peyton should not have heard of it, or suspected the young girl's disaffection. Perhaps she had, — it was another burden laid upon her shoulders, — but the proud woman had kept it to herself. A film of moisture came across his eyes. I fear he thought less of the suggestion of Susy's secret meeting with Pedro, or Incarnacion's implied suspicions

that Pedro was concerned in Peyton's death, than of this sentimental possibility. He knew that Pedro had been hated by the others on account of his position; he knew the instinctive jealousies of the race and their predisposition to extravagant misconstruction. From what he had gathered, and particularly from the voices he had overheard on the Fair Plains Road, it seemed to him that Pedro was more capable of mercenary intrigue than physical revenge. He was not aware of the irrevocable affront put upon Pedro by Peyton, and he had consequently attached no importance to Peyton's own half-scornful intimation of the only kind of retaliation that Pedro would be likely to make. The unsuccessful attempt upon himself he had always thought might have been an accident, or if it was really a premeditated assault, it might have been intended actually for *himself* and not Peyton, as he had first thought, and his old friend had suffered for *him*, through some mistake of the assailant. The purpose, which alone seemed wanting, might have been to remove Clarence as a possible witness who had overheard their conspiracy — how much of it they did not know — on the Fair Plains Road that night. The only clue he held to the murderer, in the spur locked in his desk, merely led him beyond the confines of the rancho, but definitely nowhere else. It was, however, some relief to know that the crime was not committed by one of Peyton's retainers, nor the outcome of domestic treachery.

After some consideration he resolved to seek Jim Hooker, who might be possessed of some information respecting Susy's relations, either from the young girl's own confidences or from Jim's personal knowledge of the old frontier families. From a sense of loyalty to Susy and Mrs. Peyton, he had never alluded to the subject before him, but since the young girl's own indiscretion had made it a matter of common report, however distasteful it was

to his own feelings, he felt he could not plead the sense of delicacy for her. He had great hopes in what he had always believed was only her exaggeration of fact as well as feeling. And he had an instinctive reliance on her fellow poseur's ability to detect it. A few days later, when he found he could safely leave the rancho alone, he rode to Fair Plains.

The floods were out along the turnpike road, and even seemed to have increased since his last journey. The face of the landscape had changed again. One of the lower terraces had become a wild mere of sedge and reeds. The dry and dusty bed of a forgotten brook had reappeared, a full-banked river, crossing the turnpike and compelling a long détour before the traveler could ford it. But as he approached the Hopkins farm and the opposite clearing and cabin of Jim Hooker, he was quite unprepared for a still more remarkable transformation. The cabin, a three-roomed structure, and its cattle-shed had entirely disappeared! There were no traces or signs of inundation. The land lay on a gentle acclivity above the farm and secure from the effects of the flood, and a part of the ploughed and cleared land around the site of the cabin showed no evidence of overflow on its black, upturned soil. But the house was gone! Only a few timbers too heavy to be removed, the blighting erasions of a few months of occupation, and the dull, blackened area of the site itself were to be seen. The fence alone was intact.

Clarence halted before it, perplexed and astonished. Scarcely two weeks had elapsed since he had last visited it and sat beneath its roof with Jim, and already its few ruins had taken upon themselves the look of years of abandonment and decay. The wild land seemed to have thrown off its yoke of cultivation in a night, and nature rioted again with all its primal forces over the freed soil. Wild oats and mustard were springing already in the broken

furrows, and lank vines were slimily spreading over a few scattered but still unseasoned and sappy shingles. Some battered tin cans and fragments of old clothing looked as remote as if they had been relics of the earliest immigration.

Clarence turned inquiringly towards the Hopkins farmhouse across the road. His arrival, however, had already been noticed, as the door of the kitchen opened in an anticipatory fashion, and he could see the slight figure of Phœbe Hopkins in the doorway, backed by the overlooking heads and shoulders of her parents. The face of the young girl was pale and drawn with anxiety, at which Clarence's simple astonishment took a shade of concern.

"I am looking for Mr. Hooker," he said uneasily. "And I don't seem to be able to find either him or his house."

"And you don't know what 's gone of him?" said the girl quickly.

"No; I have n't seen him for two weeks."

"There, I told you so!" said the girl, turning nervously to her parents. "I knew it. He has n't seen him for two weeks." Then, looking almost tearfully at Clarence's face, she said, "No more have we."

"But," said Clarence impatiently, "something must have happened. Where is his house?"

"Taken away by them jumpers," interrupted the old farmer; "a lot of roughs that pulled it down and carted it off in a jiffy before our very eyes without answerin' a civil question to me or her. But he was n't there, nor before, nor since."

"No," added the old woman, with flashing eyes, "or he 'd let 'em have what ther' was in his six-shooters."

"No, he would n't, mother," said the girl impatiently, "he 'd *changed*, and was agin all them ideas of force and riotin'. He was for peace and law all the time. Why,

the day before we missed him he was tellin' me California never would be decent until people obeyed the laws and the titles were settled. And for that reason, because he would n't fight agin the law, or without the consent of the law, they 've killed him, or kidnapped him away."

The girl's lips quivered, and her small brown hands twisted the edges of her blue checked apron. Although this new picture of Jim's peacefulness was as astounding and unsatisfactory as his own disappearance, there was no doubt of the sincerity of poor Phœbe's impression.

In vain did Clarence point out to them there must be some mistake; that the trespassers — the so-called jumpers — really belonged to the same party as Hooker, and would have no reason to dispossess him; that, in fact, they were all *his*, Clarence's, tenants. In vain he assured them of Hooker's perfect security in possession; that he could have driven the intruders away by the simple exhibition of his lease, or that he could have even called a constable from the town of Fair Plains to protect him from mere lawlessness. In vain did he assure them of his intention to find his missing friend, and reinstate him at any cost. The conviction that the unfortunate young man had been foully dealt with was fixed in the minds of the two women. For a moment Clarence himself was staggered by it.

"You see," said the young girl, with a kindling face, "the day before he came back from Robles, ther' were some queer men hangin' round his cabin, but as they were the same kind that went off with him the day the Sisters' title was confirmed, we thought nothing of it. But when he came back from you he seemed worried and anxious, and was n't a bit like himself. We thought perhaps he 'd got into some trouble there, or been disappointed. He had n't, had he, Mr. Brant?" continued Phœbe, with an appealing look.

"By no means," said Clarence warmly. "On the con-

trary, he was able to do his friends good service there, and was successful in what he attempted. Mrs. Peyton was very grateful. Of course he told you what had happened, and what he did for us," continued Clarence, with a smile.

He had already amused himself on the way with a fanciful conception of the exaggerated account Jim had given of his exploits. But the bewildered girl shook her head.

"No, he didn't tell us *anything*."

Clarence was really alarmed. This unprecedented abstention of Hooker's was portentous.

"He didn't say anything but what I told you about law and order," she went on; "but that same night we heard a good deal of talking and shouting in the cabin and around it. And the next day he was talking with father, and wanting to know how *he* kept his land without trouble from outsiders."

"And I said," broke in Hopkins, "that I guessed folks didn't bother a man with women folks around, and that I kalkilated that *I* was n't quite as notorious for fightin' as he was."

"And he said," also interrupted Mrs. Hopkins, "and quite in his nat'ral way, too, — gloomy like, you remember, Cyrus," appealingly to her husband, — "that that was his curse."

The smile that flickered around Clarence's mouth faded, however, as he caught sight of Phœbe's pleading, interrogating eyes. It was really too bad. Whatever change had come over the rascal it was too evident that his previous belligerent personality had had its full effect upon the simple girl, and that, hereafter, one pair of honest eyes would be wistfully following him.

Perplexed and indignant, Clarence again closely questioned her as to the personnel of the trespassing party who had been seen once or twice since passing over the field. He had at last elicited enough information to identify one

of them as Gilroy, the leader of the party that had invaded Robles Rancho. His cheek flushed. Even if they had wished to take a theatrical and momentary revenge on Hooker for the passing treachery to them which they had just discovered, although such retaliation was only transitory, and they could not hold the land, it was an insult to Clarence himself, whose tenant Jim was, and subversive of all their legally acquired rights. He would confront this Gilroy at once; his half-wild encampment was only a few miles away, just over the boundaries of the Robles estate. Without stating his intention, he took leave of the Hopkins family with the cheerful assurance that he would probably return with some news of Hooker, and rode away.

The trail became more indistinct and unfrequented as it diverged from the main road, and presently lost itself in the slope towards the east. The horizon grew larger: there were faint bluish lines upon it which he knew were distant mountains; beyond this a still fainter white line — the Sierran snows. Presently he intersected a trail running south, and remarked that it crossed the highway behind him, where he had once met the two mysterious horsemen. They had evidently reached the terrace through the wild oats by that trail. A little farther on were a few groups of sheds and canvas tents in a bare and open space, with scattered cattle and horsemen, exactly like an encampment, or the gathering of a country fair. As Clarence rode down towards them he could see that his approach was instantly observed, and that a simultaneous movement was made as if to anticipate him. For the first time he realized the possible consequences of his visit, single-handed, but it was too late to retrace his steps. With a glance at his holster, he rode boldly forward to the nearest shed. A dozen men hovered near him, but something in his quiet, determined manner held them aloof. Gilroy

was on the threshold in his shirt sleeves. A single look showed him that Clarence was alone, and with a careless gesture of his hand he warned away his own followers.

"You 've got a sort of easy way of droppin' in whar you ain't invited, Brant," he said with a grim smile, which was not, however, without a certain air of approval. "Got it from your father, did n't you?"

"I don't know, but I don't believe *he* ever thought it necessary to warn twenty men of the approach of one," replied Clarence, in the same tone. "I had no time to stand on ceremony, for I have just come from Hooker's quarter section at Fair Plains."

Gilroy smiled again, and gazed abstractedly at the sky.

"You know as well as I do," said Clarence, controlling his voice with an effort, "that what you have done there will have to be undone, if you wish to hold even those lawless men of yours together, or keep yourself and them from being run into the brush like highwaymen. I 've no fear for that. Neither do I care to know what was your motive in doing it; but I can only tell you that if it was retaliation, I alone was and still am responsible for Hooker's action at the rancho. I came here to know just what you have done with him, and, if necessary, to take his place."

"You 're just a little too previous in your talk, I reckon, Brant," returned Gilroy lazily, "and as to legality, I reckon we stand on the same level with yourself, just here. Beginnin' with what you came for: as we don't know where your Jim Hooker is, and as we ain't done anythin' to *him*, we don't exackly see what we could do with *you* in his place. Ez to our motives, — well, we 've got a good deal to say about *that*. We reckoned that he was n't exackly the kind of man we wanted for a neighbor. His pow'ful fightin' style did n't suit us peaceful folks, and we thought it rather worked agin this new 'law and order'

racket to have such a man about, to say nuthin' of it prejudicin' quiet settlers. He had too many revolvers for one man to keep his eye on, and was altogether too much steeped in blood, so to speak, for ordinary washin' and domestic purposes! His hull get up was too deathlike and clammy; so we persuaded him to leave. We just went there, all of us, and exhorted him. We stayed round there two days and nights, takin' turns, talkin' with him, nuthin' more, only selecting subjects in his own style to please him, until he left! And then, as we did n't see any use for his house there, we took it away. Them 's the cold facts, Brant," he added with a certain convincing indifference that left no room for doubt, "and you can stand by 'em. Now, workin' back to the first principle you laid down, — that we 'll have to *undo* what we 've *done*, — we don't agree with you, for we 've taken a leaf outer your own book. We 've got it here in black and white. We 've got a bill o' sale of Hooker's house and possession, and we 're on the land in place of him, — *as your tenants.*" He reëntered the shanty, took a piece of paper from a soap-box on the shelf, and held it out to Clarence. "Here it is. It 's a fair and square deal, Brant. We gave him, as it says here, a hundred dollars for it! No humbuggin', but the hard cash, by Jiminy! *And he took the money.*"

The ring of truth in the man's voice was as unmistakable as the signature in Jim's own hand. Hooker had sold out! Clarence turned hastily away.

"We don't know where he went," continued Gilroy grimly, "but I reckon you ain't over anxious to see him *now*. And I kin tell ye something to ease your mind, — he did n't require much persuadin'. And I kin tell ye another, if ye ain't above takin' advice from folks that don't pretend to give it," he added, with the same curious look of interest in his face. "You 've done well to get

shut of him, and if you got shut of a few more of his kind that you trust to, you 'd do better."

As if to avoid noticing any angry reply from the young man, he reëntered the cabin and shut the door behind him. Clarence felt the uselessness of further parley, and rode away.

But Gilroy's Parthian arrow rankled as he rode. He was not greatly shocked at Jim's defection, for he was always fully conscious of his vanity and weakness; but he was by no means certain that Jim's extravagance and braggadocio, which he had found only amusing and, perhaps, even pathetic, might not be as provocative and prejudicial to others as Gilroy had said. But, like all sympathetic and unselfish natures, he sought to find some excuse for his old companion's weakness in his own mistaken judgment. He had no business to bring poor Jim on the land, to subject his singular temperament to the temptations of such a life and such surroundings; he should never have made use of his services at the rancho. He had done him harm rather than good in his ill-advised, and, perhaps, *selfish* attempts to help him. I have said that Gilroy's parting warning rankled in his breast, but not ignobly. It wounded the surface of his sensitive nature, but could not taint or corrupt the pure, wholesome blood of the gentleman beneath it. For in Gilroy's warning he saw only his own shortcomings. A strange fatality had marked his friendships. He had been no help to Jim; he had brought no happiness to Susy or Mrs. Peyton, whose disagreement his visit seemed to have accented. Thinking over the mysterious attack upon himself, it now seemed to him possible that, in some obscure way, his presence at the rancho had precipitated the more serious attack on Peyton. If, as it had been said, there was some curse upon his inheritance from his father, he seemed to have made others share it with him. He was riding onward

abstractedly, with his head sunk on his breast and his eyes fixed upon some vague point between his horse's sensitive ears, when a sudden, intelligent, forward pricking of them startled him, and an apparition arose from the plain before him that seemed to sweep all other sense away.

It was the figure of a handsome young horseman as abstracted as himself, but evidently on better terms with his own personality. He was dark haired, sallow cheeked, and blue eyed, — the type of the old Spanish Californian. A burnt-out cigarette was in his mouth, and he was riding a roan mustang with the lazy grace of his race. But what arrested Clarence's attention more than his picturesque person was the narrow, flexible, long coil of gray horse-hair riata which hung from his saddle-bow, but whose knotted and silver-beaded terminating lash he was swirling idly in his narrow brown hand. Clarence knew and instantly recognized it as the ordinary fanciful appendage of a gentleman rider, used for tethering his horse on lonely plains, and always made the object of the most lavish expenditure of decoration and artistic skill. But he was as suddenly filled with a blind, unreasoning sense of repulsion and fury, and lifted his eyes to the man as he approached. What the stranger saw in Clarence's blazing eyes no one but himself knew, for his own became fixed and staring; his sallow cheeks grew lanker and livid; his careless, jaunty bearing stiffened into rigidity, and swerving his horse to one side he suddenly passed Clarence at a furious gallop. The young American wheeled quickly, and for an instant his knees convulsively gripped the flanks of his horse to follow. But the next moment he recalled himself, and with an effort began to collect his thoughts. What was he intending to do, and for what reason! He had met hundreds of such horsemen before, and caparisoned and accoutred like this, even to the riata. And he certainly was not dressed like either of the myste-

rious horsemen whom he had overheard that moonlight evening. He looked back; the stranger had already slackened his pace, and was slowly disappearing. Clarence turned and rode on his way.

CHAPTER IX

WITHOUT disclosing the full extent of Jim's defection and desertion, Clarence was able to truthfully assure the Hopkins family of his personal safety, and to promise that he would continue his quest, and send them further news of the absentee. He believed it would be found that Jim had been called away on some important business, but that not daring to leave his new shanty exposed and temptingly unprotected, he had made a virtue of necessity by selling it to his neighbors, intending to build a better house on its site after his return. Having comforted Phœbe, and impulsively conceived further plans for restoring Jim to her, — happily without any recurrence of his previous doubts as to his own efficacy as a special Providence, — he returned to the rancho. If he thought again of Jim's defection and Gilroy's warning, it was only to strengthen himself to a clearer perception of his unselfish duty and singleness of purpose. He would give up brooding, apply himself more practically to the management of the property, carry out his plans for the foundation of a Landlords' Protective League for the southern counties, become a candidate for the Legislature, and, in brief, try to fill Peyton's place in the county as he had at the rancho. He would endeavor to become better acquainted with the half-breed laborers on the estate and avoid the friction between them and the Americans; he was conscious that he had not made that use of his early familiarity with their ways and language which he might have done. If, occasionally, the figure of the young Spaniard whom he had met on the

lonely road obtruded itself on him, it was always with the instinctive premonition that he would meet him again, and the mystery of the sudden repulsion be in some way explained. Thus Clarence! But the momentary impulse that had driven him to Fair Plains, the eagerness to set his mind at rest regarding Susy and her relatives, he had utterly forgotten.

Howbeit some of the energy and enthusiasm that he breathed into these various essays made their impression. He succeeded in forming the Landlords' League; under a commission suggested by him the straggling boundaries of Robles and the adjacent claims were resurveyed, defined, and mutually protected; even the lawless Gilroy, from extending an amused toleration to the young administrator, grew to recognize and accept him; the peons and vaqueros began to have faith in a man who acknowledged them sufficiently to rebuild the ruined Mission Chapel on the estate, and save them the long pilgrimage to Santa Inez on Sundays and saints' days; the San Francisco priest imported from Clarence's old college at San José, and an habitual guest at Clarence's hospitable board, was grateful enough to fill his flock with loyalty to the young padron.

He had returned from a long drive one afternoon, and had just thrown himself into an easy chair with the comfortable consciousness of a rest fairly earned. The dull embers of a fire occasionally glowed in the oven-like hearth, although the open casement of a window let in the soft breath of the southwest trades. The angelus had just rung from the restored chapel, and, mellowed by distance, seemed to Clarence to lend that repose to the wind-swept landscape that it had always lacked.

Suddenly his quick ear detected the sound of wheels in the ruts of the carriage way. Usually his visitors to the casa came on horseback, and carts and wagons used only the lower road. As the sound approached nearer, an odd

fancy filled his heart with unaccountable pleasure. Could it be Mrs. Peyton making an unexpected visit to the rancho? He held his breath. The vehicle was now rolling on into the patio. The clatter of hoofs and a halt were followed by the accents of women's voices. One seemed familiar. He rose quickly, as light footsteps ran along the corridor, and then the door opened impetuously to the laughing face of Susy!

He came towards her hastily, yet with only the simple impulse of astonishment. He had no thought of kissing her, but as he approached, she threw her charming head archly to one side, with a mischievous knitting of her brows and a significant gesture towards the passage, that indicated the proximity of a stranger and the possibility of interruption.

"Hush! Mrs. McClosky 's here," she whispered.

"Mrs. McClosky?" repeated Clarence vaguely.

"Yes, of course," impatiently. "My Aunt Jane. Silly! We just cut away down here to surprise you. Aunty 's never seen the place, and here was a good chance."

"And your mother — Mrs. Peyton? Has she — does she?" — stammered Clarence.

"Has she — does she?" mimicked Susy, with increasing impatience. "Why, of course she *does n't* know anything about it. She thinks I 'm visiting Mary Rogers at Oakland. And I am — *afterwards*," she laughed. "I just wrote to Aunt Jane to meet me at Alameda, and we took the stage to Santa Inez and drove on here in a buggy. Was n't it real fun? Tell me, Clarence! You don't say anything! Tell me — was n't it real fun?"

This was all so like her old, childlike, charming, irresponsible self, that Clarence, troubled and bewildered as he was, took her hands and drew her like a child towards him.

"Of course," she went on, yet stopping to smell a rose

bud in his buttonhole, "I have a perfect right to come to my own home, goodness knows! and if I bring my own aunt, a married woman, with me, — although," loftily, "there may be a young unmarried gentleman alone there, — still I fail to see any impropriety in it!"

He was still holding her; but in that instant her manner had completely changed again; the old Susy seemed to have slipped away and evaded him, and he was retaining only a conscious actress in his arms.

"Release me, Mr. Brant, please," she said, with a languid affected glance behind her; "we are not alone."

Then, as the rustling of a skirt sounded nearer in the passage, she seemed to change back to her old self once more, and with a lightning flash of significance whispered, —

"She knows everything!"

To add to Clarence's confusion, the woman who entered cast a quick glance of playful meaning on the separating youthful pair. She was an ineffective blonde with a certain beauty that seemed to be gradually succumbing to the ravages of paint and powder rather than years; her dress appeared to have suffered from an equally unwise excess of ornamentation and trimming, and she gave the general impression of having been intended for exhibition in almost any other light than the one in which she happened to be. There were two or three mudstains on the laces of her sleeve and underskirt that were obtrusively incongruous. Her voice, which had, however, a ring of honest intention in it, was somewhat over-strained, and evidently had not yet adjusted itself to the low-ceilinged, conventual-like building.

"There, children, don't mind me! I know I 'm not on in this scene, but I got nervous waiting there, in what you call the 'sallon,' with only those Greaser servants staring round me in a circle, like a regular chorus. My! but it 's

anteek here — regular anteek — Spanish." Then, with a glance at Clarence, "So this is Clarence Brant, — your Clarence? Interduce me, Susy."

In his confusion of indignation, pain, and even a certain conception of the grim ludicrousness of the situation, Clarence grasped despairingly at the single sentence of Susy's. "In my own home." Surely, at least, it was *her own home*, and as he was only the business agent of her adopted mother, he had no right to dictate to her under what circumstances she should return to it, or whom she should introduce there. In her independence and caprice Susy might easily have gone elsewhere with this astounding relative, and would Mrs. Peyton like it better? Clinging to this idea, his instinct of hospitality asserted itself. He welcomed Mrs. McClosky with nervous effusion: —

"I am only Mrs. Peyton's major-domo here, but any guest of her *daughter's* is welcome."

"Yes," said Mrs. McClosky, with ostentatious archness, "I reckon Susy and I understand your position here, and you 've got a good berth of it. But we won't trouble you much on Mrs. Peyton's account, will we, Susy? And now she and me will just take a look around the shanty, — it is real old Spanish anteek, ain't it? — and sorter take stock of it, and you young folks will have to tear yourselves apart for a while, and play propriety before me. You 've got to be on your good behavior while I 'm here, I can tell you! I 'm a heavy old 'doo-anna.' Ain't I, Susy? Schoolma'ms and mother superiors ain't in the game with *me* for discipline."

She threw her arms around the young girl's waist and drew her towards her affectionately, an action that slightly precipitated some powder upon the black dress of her niece. Susy glanced mischievously at Clarence, but withdrew her eyes presently to let them rest with unmistakable appreciation and admiration on her relative. A pang shot through

Clarence's breast. He had never seen her look in that way at Mrs. Peyton. Yet here was this stranger, provincial, overdressed, and extravagant, whose vulgarity was only made tolerable through her good humor, who had awakened that interest which the refined Mrs. Peyton had never yet been able to touch. As Mrs. McClosky swept out of the room with Susy he turned away with a sinking heart.

Yet it was necessary that the Spanish house servants should not suspect this treason to their mistress, and Clarence stopped their childish curiosity about the stranger with a careless and easy acceptance of Susy's sudden visit in the light of an ordinary occurrence, and with a familiarity towards Mrs. McClosky which became the more distasteful to him in proportion as he saw that it was evidently agreeable to her. But, easily responsive, she became speedily confidential. Without a single question from himself, or a contributing remark from Susy, in half an hour she had told him her whole history. How, as Jane Silsbee, an elder sister of Susy's mother, she had early eloped from the paternal home in Kansas with McClosky, a strolling actor. How she had married him and gone on the stage under his stage name, effectively preventing any recognition by her family. How, coming to California, where her husband had become manager of the theatre at Sacramento, she was indignant to find that her only surviving relation, a sister-in-law, living in the same place, had for a money consideration given up all claim to the orphaned Susy, and how she had resolved to find out "if the poor child was happy." How she succeeded in finding out that she was not happy. How she wrote to her, and even met her secretly at San Francisco and Oakland, and how she had undertaken this journey partly for "a lark," and partly to see Clarence and the property. There was no doubt of the speaker's sincerity;

with this outrageous candor there was an equal obliviousness of any indelicacy in her conduct towards Mrs. Peyton that seemed hopeless. Yet he must talk plainly to her; he must say to her what he could not say to Susy; upon *her* Mrs. Peyton's happiness — he believed he was thinking of Susy's also — depended. He must take the first opportunity of speaking to her alone.

That opportunity came sooner than he had expected. After dinner, Mrs. McClosky turned to Susy, and, playfully telling her that she had "to talk business" with Mr. Brant, bade her go to the salon and await her. When the young girl left the room, she looked at Clarence, and, with that assumption of curtness with which coarse but kindly natures believe they overcome the difficulty of delicate subjects, said abruptly: —

"Well, young man, now what 's all this between you and Susy? I 'm looking after her interests — same as if she was my own girl. If you 've got anything to say, now 's your time. And don't you shilly-shally too long over it, either, for you might as well know that a girl like that can have her pick and choice, and be beholden to no one; and when she don't care to choose, there 's me and my husband ready to do for her all the same. We might n't be able to do the anteek Spanish Squire, but we 've got our own line of business, and it 's a comfortable one."

To have this said to him under the roof of Mrs. Peyton, from whom, in his sensitiveness, he had thus far jealously guarded his own secret, was even more than Clarence's gentleness could stand, and fixed his wavering resolution.

"I don't think we quite understand each other, Mrs. McClosky," he said coldly, but with glittering eyes. "I have certainly something to say to you; if it is not on a subject as pleasant as the one you propose, it is, nevertheless, one that I think you and I are more competent to discuss together."

Then, with quiet but unrelenting directness, he pointed out to her that Susy was a legally adopted daughter of Mrs. Peyton, and, as a minor, utterly under her control; that Mrs. Peyton had no knowledge of any opposing relatives; and that Susy had not only concealed the fact from her, but that he was satisfied that Mrs. Peyton did not even know of Susy's discontent and alienation; that she had tenderly and carefully brought up the helpless orphan as her own child, and, even if she had not gained her affection, was at least entitled to her obedience and respect; that while Susy's girlish caprice and inexperience excused *her* conduct, Mrs. Peyton and her friends would have a right to expect more consideration from a person of Mrs. McClosky's maturer judgment. That for these reasons, and as the friend of Mrs. Peyton, whom he could alone recognize as Susy's guardian and the arbiter of her affections, he must decline to discuss the young girl with any reference to himself or his own intentions.

An unmistakable flush asserted itself under the lady's powder.

"Suit yourself, young man, suit yourself," she said, with equally direct resentment and antagonism; "only mebbee you 'll let me tell you that Jim McClosky ain't no fool, and mebbee knows what lawyers think of an arrangement with a sister-in-law that leaves a real sister out! Mebbee that 's a 'Sister's title' you ain't thought of, Mr. Brant! And mebbee you 'll find out that your chance o' gettin' Mrs. Peyton's consent ain't as safe to gamble on as you reckon it is. And mebbee, what 's more to the purpose, if you *did* get it, it might not be just the trump card to fetch Susy with! And to wind up, Mr. Brant, when you *do* have to come down to the bed-rock and me and Jim McClosky, you may find out that him and me have discovered a better match for Susy than the son of old Ham Brant, who is trying to play the Spanish grandee

off his father's money on a couple of women. And we may n't have to go far to do it — or to get *the real thing*, Mr. Brant!"

Too heartsick and disgusted to even notice the slur upon himself or the import of her last words, Clarence only rose and bowed as she jumped up from the table. But as she reached the door he said, half appealingly: —

"Whatever are your other intentions, Mrs. McClosky, as we are both Susy's guests, I beg you will say nothing of this to her while we are here, and particularly that you will not allow her to think for a moment that I have discussed *my* relations to her with anybody."

She flung herself out of the door without a reply; but on entering the dark low-ceilinged drawing-room she was surprised to find that Susy was not there. She was consequently obliged to return to the veranda, where Clarence had withdrawn, and to somewhat ostentatiously demand of the servants that Susy should be sent to her room at once. But the young girl was not in her own room, and was apparently nowhere to be found. Clarence, who had now fully determined as a last resource to make a direct appeal to Susy herself, listened to this fruitless search with some concern. She could not have gone out in the rain, which was again falling. She might be hiding somewhere to avoid a recurrence of the scene she had perhaps partly overheard. He turned into the corridor that led to Mrs. Peyton's boudoir. As he knew that it was locked, he was surprised to see by the dim light of the hanging lamp that a duplicate key to the one in his desk was in the lock. It must be Susy's, and the young girl had probably taken refuge there. He knocked gently. There was a rustle in the room and the sound of a chair being moved, but no reply. Impelled by a sudden instinct he opened the door, and was met by a cool current of air from some open window. At the same moment the figure of Susy approached him from the semi-darkness of the interior.

"I did not know you were here," said Clarence, much relieved, he knew not why, "but I am glad, for I wanted to speak with you alone for a few moments."

She did not reply, but he drew a match from his pocket and lit the two candles which he knew stood on the table. The wick of one was still warm, as if it had been recently extinguished. As the light slowly radiated, he could see that she was regarding him with an air of affected unconcern, but a somewhat heightened color. It was like her, and not inconsistent with his idea that she had come there to avoid an after scene with Mrs. McClosky or himself, or perhaps both. The room was not disarranged in any way. The window that was opened was the casement of the deep embrasured one in the rear wall, and the light curtain before it still swayed occasionally in the night wind.

"I'm afraid I had a row with your aunt, Susy," he began lightly, in his old familiar way; "but I had to tell her I did n't think her conduct to Mrs. Peyton was exactly the square thing towards one who had been as devoted to you as she has been."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, don't go over all that again," said Susy impatiently. "I've had enough of it."

Clarence flushed, but recovered himself.

"Then you overheard what I said, and know what I think," he said calmly.

"I knew it *before*," said the young girl, with a slight supercilious toss of the head, and yet a certain abstraction of manner as she went to the window and closed it. "Anybody could see it! I know you always wanted me to stay here with Mrs. Peyton, and be coddled and monitored and catechised and shut up away from any one, until *you* had been coddled and monitored and catechised by somebody else sufficiently to suit her ideas of your being a fit husband for me. I told aunty it was no use our coming here to — to" —

"To do what?" asked Clarence.

"To put some spirit into you," said the young girl, turning upon him sharply; "to keep you from being tied to that woman's apron-strings. To keep her from making a slave of you as she would of me. But it is of no use. Mary Rogers was right when she said you had no wish to please anybody but Mrs. Peyton, and no eyes for anybody but her. And if it had n't been too ridiculous, considering her age and yours, she 'd say you were dead in love with her."

For an instant Clarence felt the blood rush to his face and then sink away, leaving him pale and cold. The room, which had seemed to whirl around him, and then fade away, returned with appalling distinctness, — the distinctness of memory, — and a vision of the first day that he had seen Mrs. Peyton sitting there, as he seemed to see her now. For the first time there flashed upon him the conviction that the young girl had spoken the truth, and had brusquely brushed the veil from his foolish eyes. He *was* in love with Mrs. Peyton! That was what his doubts and hesitation regarding Susy meant. That alone was the source, secret, and limit of his vague ambition.

But with the conviction came a singular calm. In the last few moments he seemed to have grown older, to have loosed the bonds of old companionship with Susy, and the later impression she had given him of her mature knowledge, and moved on far beyond her years and experience. And it was with an authority that was half paternal, and in a voice he himself scarcely recognized, that he said: —

"If I did not know you were prejudiced by a foolish and indiscreet woman, I should believe that you were trying to insult me as you have your adopted mother, and would save you the pain of doing both in *her* house by leaving it now and forever. But because I believe you are controlled against your best instinct by that woman, I

shall remain here with you to frustrate her as best I can, or until I am able to lay everything before Mrs. Peyton except the foolish speech you have just made."

The young girl laughed. "Why not *that* one too, while you 're about it? See what she 'll say."

"I shall tell her," continued Clarence calmly, "only what *you* yourself have made it necessary for me to tell her to save you from folly and disgrace, and only enough to spare her the mortification of hearing it first from her own servants."

"Hearing *what* from her own servants? What do you mean? How dare you?" demanded the young girl sharply.

She was quite real in her anxiety now, although her attitude of virtuous indignation struck him as being like all her emotional expression, namely, acting.

"I mean that the servants know of your correspondence with Mrs. McClosky, and that she claims to be your aunt," returned Clarence. "They know that you confided to Pepita. They believe that either Mrs. McClosky or you have seen" —

He had stopped suddenly. He was about to say that the servants (particularly Incarnacion) knew that Pedro had boasted of having met Susy, when, for the first time, the tremendous significance of what he had hitherto considered as merely an idle falsehood flashed upon him.

"Seen whom?" repeated Susy in a higher voice, impatiently stamping her foot.

Clarence looked at her, and in her excited, questioning face saw a confirmation of his still half-formed suspicions. In his own abrupt pause and knitted eyebrows she must have read his thoughts also. Their eyes met. Her violet pupils dilated, trembled, and then quickly shifted as she suddenly stiffened into an attitude of scornful indifference, almost grotesque in its unreality. His eyes slowly turned

to the window, the door, the candles on the table and the chair before it, and then came back to her face again. Then he drew a deep breath.

"I give no heed to the idle gossip of servants, Susy," he said slowly. "I have no belief that you have ever contemplated anything worse than an act of girlish folly, or the gratification of a passing caprice. Neither do I want to appeal to you or frighten you, but I must tell you now, that I know certain facts that might make such a simple act of folly monstrous, inconceivable in *you*, and almost accessory to a crime! I can tell you no more. But so satisfied am I of such a possibility, that I shall not scruple to take any means — the strongest — to prevent even the remotest chance of it. Your aunt has been looking for you; you had better go to her now. I will close the room and lock the door. Meantime, I should advise you not to sit so near an open window with a candle at night in this locality. Even if it might not be dangerous for you, it might be fatal to the foolish creatures it might attract."

He took the key from the door as he held it open for her to pass out. She uttered a shrill little laugh, like a nervous, mischievous child, and, slipping out of her previous artificial attitude as if it had been a mantle, ran out of the room.

CHAPTER X

As Susy's footsteps died away, Clarence closed the door, walked to the window, and examined it closely. The bars had been restored since he had wrenched them off to give ingress to the family on the day of recapture. He glanced around the room; nothing seemed to have been disturbed. Nevertheless he was uneasy. The suspicions of a frank, trustful nature when once aroused are apt to be more general and far-reaching than the specific distrusts of the disingenuous, for they imply the overthrow of a whole principle and not a mere detail. Clarence's conviction that Susy had seen Pedro recently since his dismissal led him into the wildest surmises of her motives. It was possible that without her having reason to suspect Pedro's greater crime, he might have confided to her his intention of reclaiming the property and installing her as the mistress and chatelaine of the rancho. The idea was one that might have appealed to Susy's theatrical imagination. He recalled Mrs. McClosky's sneer at his own pretensions and her vague threats of a rival of more lineal descent. The possible infidelity of Susy to himself touched him lightly when the first surprise was over; indeed, it scarcely could be called infidelity, if she knew and believed Mary Rogers's discovery; and the conviction that he and she had really never loved each other now enabled him, as he believed, to look at her conduct dispassionately. Yet it was her treachery to Mrs. Peyton and not to himself that impressed him most, and perhaps made him equally unjust, through his affections.

He extinguished the candles, partly from some vague precautions he could not explain, and partly to think over his fears in the abstraction and obscurity of the semi-darkness. The higher windows suffused a faint light on the ceiling, and, assisted by the dark lantern-like glow cast on the opposite wall by the tunnel of the embrasured window, the familiar outlines of the room and its furniture came back to him. Somewhat in this fashion also, in the obscurity and quiet, came back to him the events he had overlooked and forgotten. He recalled now some gossip of the servants, and hints dropped by Susy of a violent quarrel between Peyton and Pedro, which resulted in Pedro's dismissal, but which now seemed clearly attributable to some graver cause than inattention and insolence. He recalled Mary Rogers's playful pleasantries with Susy about Pedro, and Susy's mysterious air, which he had hitherto regarded only as part of her exaggeration. He remembered Mrs. Peyton's unwarrantable uneasiness about Susy, which he had either overlooked or referred entirely to himself; she must have suspected something. To his quickened imagination, in this ruin of his faith and trust, he believed that Hooker's defection was either part of the conspiracy, or that he had run away to avoid being implicated with Susy in its discovery. This, too, was the significance of Gilroy's parting warning. He and Mrs. Peyton alone had been blind and confiding in the midst of this treachery, and even *he* had been blind to his own real affections.

The wind had risen again, and the faint light on the opposite wall grew tremulous and shifting with the movement of the foliage without. But presently the glow became quite obliterated, as if by the intervention of some opaque body outside the window. He rose hurriedly and went to the casement. But at the same moment he fancied he heard the jamming of a door or window in quite an-

other direction, and his examination of the casement before him showed him only the silver light of the thinly clouded sky falling uninterruptedly through the bars and foliage on the interior of the whitewashed embrasure. Then a conception of his mistake flashed across him. The line of the casa was long, straggling, and exposed elsewhere; why should the attempt to enter or communicate with any one within be confined only to this single point? And why not satisfy himself at once if any trespassers were lounging around the walls, and then confront them boldly in the open? Their discovery and identification was as important as the defeat of their intentions.

He relit the candle, and, placing it on a small table by the wall beyond the visual range of the window, rearranged the curtain so that, while it permitted the light to pass out, it left the room in shadow. He then opened the door softly, locked it behind him, and passed noiselessly into the hall. Susy's and Mrs. McClosky's rooms were at the further end of the passage, but between them and the boudoir was the open patio, and the low murmur of the voices of servants, who still lingered until he should dismiss them for the night. Turning back, he moved silently down the passage, until he reached the narrow arched door to the garden. This he unlocked and opened with the same stealthy caution. The rain had recommenced. Not daring to risk a return to his room, he took from a peg in the recess an old waterproof cloak and "sou'wester" of Peyton's, which still hung there, and passed out into the night, locking the door behind him. To keep the knowledge of his secret patrol from the stablemen, he did not attempt to take out his own horse, but trusted to find some vaquero's mustang in the corral. By good luck an old "Blue Grass" hack of Peyton's, nearest the stockade as he entered, allowed itself to be quickly caught. Using its rope headstall for a bridle, Clarence vaulted on its bare

back, and paced cautiously out into the road. Here he kept the curve of the long line of stockade until he reached the outlying field where, half hidden in the withered, sapless, but still standing stalks of grain, he slowly began a circuit of the casa.

The misty gray dome above him, which an invisible moon seemed to have quicksilvered over, alternately lightened and darkened with passing gusts of fine rain. Nevertheless he could see the outline of the broad quadrangle of the house quite distinctly, except on the west side, where a fringe of writhing willows beat the brown adobe walls with their imploring arms at every gust. Elsewhere nothing moved; the view was uninterrupted to where the shining, watery sky met the equally shining, watery plain. He had already made a half circuit of the house, and was still noiselessly picking his way along the furrows, muffled with soaked and broken-down blades, and the velvety upspringing of the "volunteer" growth, when suddenly, not fifty yards before him, without sound or warning, a figure rode out of the grain upon the open cross-road, and deliberately halted with a listless, abstracted, waiting air. Clarence instantly recognized one of his own vaqueros, an undersized half-breed, but he as instantly divined that he was only an outpost or confederate, stationed to give the alarm. The same precaution had prevented each hearing the other, and the lesser height of the vaquero had rendered him indistinguishable as he preceded Clarence among the grain. As the young man made no doubt that the real trespasser was nearer the casa, along the line of willows, he wheeled to intercept him without alarming his sentry. Unfortunately, his horse answered the rope bridle clumsily, and splashed in striking out. The watcher quickly raised his head, and Clarence knew that his only chance was now to suppress him. Determined to do this at any hazard, with a threatening gesture he charged boldly down upon him.

But he had not crossed half the distance between them when the man uttered an appalling cry, so wild and despairing that it seemed to chill even the hot blood in Clarence's veins, and dashed frenziedly down the cross-road into the interminable plain. Before Clarence could determine if that cry was a signal or an involuntary outburst, it was followed instantly by the sound of frightened and struggling hoofs clattering against the wall of the casa, and a swaying of the shrubbery near the back gate of the patio. Here was his real quarry! Without hesitation he dug his heels into the flanks of his horse and rode furiously towards it. As he approached, a long tremor seemed to pass through the shrubbery, with the retreating sound of horse hoofs. The unseen trespasser had evidently taken the alarm and was fleeing, and Clarence dashed in pursuit. Following the sound, for the shrubbery hid the fugitive from view, he passed the last wall of the casa; but it soon became evident that the unknown had the better horse. The hoof-beats grew fainter and fainter, and at times appeared even to cease, until his own approach started them again, eventually to fade away in the distance. In vain Clarence dug his heels into the flanks of his heavier steed, and regretted his own mustang; and when at last he reached the edge of the thicket he had lost both sight and sound of the fugitive. The descent to the lower terrace lay before him empty and desolate. The man had escaped!

He turned slowly back with baffled anger and vindictiveness. However, he had prevented something, although he knew not what. The principal had got away, but he had identified his confederate, and for the first time held a clue to his mysterious visitant. There was no use to alarm the household, which did not seem to have been disturbed. The trespassers were far away by this time, and the attempt would hardly be repeated that night. He

made his way quietly back to the corral, let loose his horse, and regained the casa unobserved. He unlocked the arched door in the wall, reëntered the darkened passage, stopped a moment to open the door of the boudoir, glance at the closely fastened casement, and extinguish the still burning candle, and, relocking the door securely, made his way to his own room.

But he could not sleep. The whole incident, over so quickly, had nevertheless impressed him deeply, and yet like a dream. The strange yell of the vaquero still rang in his ears, but with an unearthly and superstitious significance that was even more dreamlike in its meaning. He awakened from a fitful slumber to find the light of morning in the room, and Incarnacion standing by his bedside.

The yellow face of the steward was greenish with terror, and his lips were dry.

"Get up, Señor Clarencio; get up at once, my master. Strange things have happened. Mother of God protect us!"

Clarence rolled to his feet, with the events of the past night struggling back upon his consciousness.

"What mean you, Nascio?" he said, grasping the man's arm, which was still mechanically making the sign of the cross, as he muttered incoherently. "Speak, I command you!"

"It is José, the little vaquero, who is even now at the padre's house, raving as a lunatic, stricken as a madman with terror! He has seen him, — the dead alive! Save us!"

"Are you mad yourself, Nascio?" said Clarence. "Whom has he seen?"

"Whom? God help us! the old padron — Señor Peyton himself! He rushed towards him here, in the patio, last night — out of the air, the sky, the ground, he knew not. — his own self, wrapped in his old storm cloak and

hat, and riding his own horse, — erect, terrible, and menacing, with an awful hand upholding a rope — so! He saw him with these eyes, as I see you. What *he* said to him, God knows! The priest, perhaps, for he has made confession!"

In a flash of intelligence Clarence comprehended all. He rose grimly and began to dress himself.

"Not a word of this to the women, — to any one, Nascio, dost thou understand?" he said curtly. "It may be that José has been partaking too freely of aguardiente, — it is possible. I will see the priest myself. But what possesses thee? Collect thyself, good Nascio."

But the man was still trembling.

"It is not all, — Mother of God! it is not all, master!" he stammered, dropping to his knees and still crossing himself. "This morning, beside the corral, they find the horse of Pedro Valdez splashed and spattered on saddle and bridle, and in the stirrup, — dost thou hear? the *stirrup*, — hanging, the torn-off boot of Valdez! Ah, God! The same as *his!* Now do you understand? It is *his* vengeance. No! Jesu forgive me! it is the vengeance of God!"

Clarence was staggered.

"And you have not found Valdez? You have looked for him?" he said, hurriedly throwing on his clothes.

"Everywhere, — all over the plain. The whole rancho has been out since sunrise, — here and there and everywhere. And there is nothing! Of course not. What would you?" He pointed solemnly to the ground.

"Nonsense!" said Clarence, buttoning his coat and seizing his hat. "Follow me."

He ran down the passage, followed by Incarnacion, through the excited, gesticulating crowd of servants in the patio, and out of the back gate. He turned first along the wall of the casa towards the barred window of the boudoir. Then a cry came from Incarnacion.

They ran quickly forward. Hanging from the grating of the window, like a mass of limp and saturated clothes, was the body of Pedro Valdez, with one unbooted foot dangling within an inch of the ground. His head was passed inside the grating and fixed as at that moment when the first spring of the frightened horse had broken his neck between the bars as in a garrote, and the second plunge of the terrified animal had carried off his boot in the caught stirrup when it escaped.

CHAPTER XI

The winter rains were over and gone, and the whole long line of Californian coast was dashed with color. There were miles of yellow and red poppies, leagues of lupines that painted the gently rounded hills with soft primary hues, and long continuous slopes, like low mountain systems, of daisies and dandelions. At Sacramento it was already summer; the yellow river was flashing and intolerable; the tule and marsh grasses were lush and long; the bloom of cottonwood and sycamore whitened the outskirts of the city, and as Cyrus Hopkins and his daughter Phœbe looked from the veranda of the Placer Hotel, accustomed as they were to the cool trade winds of the coast valleys, they felt homesick from the memory of eastern heats.

Later, when they were surveying the long dinner tables at the table d'hôte with something of the uncomfortable and shamefaced loneliness of the provincial, Phœbe uttered a slight cry and clutched her father's arm. Mr. Hopkins stayed the play of his squared elbows and glanced inquiringly at his daughter's face. There was a pretty animation in it, as she pointed to a figure that had just entered. It was that of a young man attired in the extravagance rather than the taste of the prevailing fashion, which did not, however, in the least conceal a decided rusticity of limb and movement. A long mustache, which looked unkempt, even in its pomatumed stiffness, and lank, dark hair that had bent but never curled under the barber's iron, made him notable even in that heterogeneous assembly.

"That 's he," whispered Phœbe.

"Who?" said her father.

Alas for the inconsistencies of love! The blush came with the name and not the vision.

"Mr. Hooker," she stammered.

It was, indeed, Jim Hooker. But the rôle of his exaggeration was no longer the same; the remorseful gloom in which he had been habitually steeped had changed into a fatigued, yet haughty, fastidiousness more in keeping with his fashionable garments. He was more peaceful, yet not entirely placable, and, as he sat down at a side table and pulled down his striped cuffs with his clasped fingers, he cast a glance of critical disapproval on the general company. Nevertheless, he seemed to be furtively watchful of his effect upon them, and as one or two whispered and looked towards him, his consciousness became darkly manifest.

All of which might have intimidated the gentle Phœbe, but did not discompose her father. He rose, and crossing over to Hooker's table, clapped him heartily on the back.

"How do, Hooker? I did n't recognize you in them fine clothes, but Phœbe guessed as how it was you."

Flushed, disconcerted, irritated, but always in wholesome awe of Mr. Hopkins, Jim returned his greeting awkwardly and half hysterically. How he would have received the more timid Phœbe is another question. But Mr. Hopkins, without apparently noticing these symptoms, went on: —

"We 're only just down, Phœbe and me, and as I guess we 'll want to talk over old times, we 'll come alongside o' you. Hold on, and I 'll fetch her."

The interval gave the unhappy Jim a chance to recover himself, to regain his vanished cuffs, display his heavy watch-chain, curl his mustache, and otherwise reassume his air of blasé fastidiousness. But the transfer made,

Phœbe, after shaking hands, became speechless under these perfections. Not so her father.

"If there 's anything in looks, you seem to be prospering," he said grimly; "unless you 're in the tailorin' line, and you 're only showin' off stock. What mout ye be doing?"

"Ye ain't bin long in Sacramento, I reckon?" suggested Jim, with patronizing pity.

"No, we only came this morning," returned Hopkins.

"And you ain't bin to the theatre?" continued Jim.

"No."

"Nor moved much in — in — gin'ral fash'nable sassiety?"

"Not yet," interposed Phœbe, with an air of faint apology.

"Nor seen any of them large posters on the fences, of 'The Prairie Flower; or, Red-handed Dick,' — three-act play with five tableaux, — just the biggest sensation out, — runnin' for forty nights, — money turned away every night, — standin' room only?" continued Jim, with prolonged toleration.

"No."

"Well, *I* play Red-handed Dick. I thought you might have seen it and recognized me. All those people over there," darkly indicating the long table, "know me. A fellow can't stand it, you know, being stared at by such a vulgar, low-bred lot. It 's gettin' too fresh here. I 'll have to give the landlord notice and cut the whole hotel. They don't seem to have ever seen a gentleman and a professional before."

"Then you 're a play-actor now?" said the farmer, in a tone which did not, however, exhibit the exact degree of admiration which shone in Phœbe's eyes.

"For the present," said Jim, with lofty indifference. "You see I was in — in partnership with McClosky, the

manager, and I did n't like the style of the chump that was doin' Red-handed Dick, so I offered to take his place one night to show him how. And by Jinks! the audience, after that night, would n't let anybody else play it, — would n't stand even the biggest, highest-priced stars in it! I reckon," he added gloomily, "I 'll have to run the darned thing in all the big towns in Californy, — if I don't have to go East with it after all, just for the business. But it 's an awful grind on a man, — leaves him no time, along of the invitations he gets, and what with being run after in the streets and stared at in the hotels he don't get no privacy. There 's men, and women, too, over at that table, that just lie in wait for me here till I come, and don't lift their eyes off me. I wonder they don't bring their opery-glasses with them."

Concerned, sympathizing, and indignant, poor Phœbe turned her brown head and honest eyes in that direction. But because they were honest, they could not help observing that the other table did not seem to be paying the slightest attention to the distinguished impersonator of Red-handed Dick. Perhaps he had been overheard.

"Then that was the reason ye did n't come back to your location. I always guessed it was because you 'd got wind of the smash-up down there, afore we did," said Hopkins grimly.

"What smash-up?" asked Jim, with slightly resentful quickness.

"Why, the smash-up of the Sisters' title, — did n't you hear that?"

There was a slight movement of relief and a return of gloomy hauteur in Jim's manner.

"No, we don't know much of what goes on in the cow counties, up here."

"Ye mout, considerin' it concerns some o' your friends," returned Hopkins dryly. "For the Sisters' title went

smash as soon as it was known that Pedro Valdez — the man as started it — had his neck broken outside the walls o' Robles Rancho; and they do say as this yer Brant, *your* friend, had suthin' to do with the breaking of it, though it was laid to the ghost of old Peyton. Anyhow, there was such a big skeer that one of the Greaser gang, who thought he 'd seen the ghost, being a Papist, to save his everlasting soul went to the priest and confessed. But the priest would n't give him absolution until he 'd blown the hull thing, and made it public. And then it turned out that all the dockyments for the title, and even the custom-house paper, were *forged* by Pedro Valdez, and put on the market by his confederates. And that 's just where *your* friend, Clarence Brant, comes in, for *he* had bought up the whole title from them fellers. Now, either, as some say, he was in the fraud from the beginnin', and never paid anything, or else he was an all-fired fool, and had parted with his money like one. Some allow that the reason was that he was awfully sweet on Mrs. Peyton's adopted daughter, and ez the parents did n't approve of him, he did *this* so as to get a holt over them by the property. But he 's a ruined man, anyway, now; for they say he 's such a darned fool that he 's goin' to pay for all the improvements that the folks who bought under him put into the land, and that 'll take his last cent. I thought I 'd tell you that, for I suppose *you* 've lost a heap in your improvements, and will put in your claim?"

"I reckon I put nearly as much into it as Clar Brant did," said Jim gloomily, "but I ain't goin' to take a cent from him, or go back on him now."

The rascal could not resist this last mendacious opportunity, although he was perfectly sincere in his renunciation, touched in his sympathy, and there was even a film of moisture in his shifting eyes.

Phœbe was thrilled with the generosity of this noble

being, who could be unselfish even in his superior condition. She added softly: —

"And they say that the girl did not care for him at all, but was actually going to run off with Pedro, when he stopped her and sent for Mrs. Peyton."

To her surprise, Jim's face flushed violently.

"It 's all a dod-blasted lie," he said, in a thick stage whisper. "It 's only the hog-wash them Greasers and Pike County galoots ladle out to each other around the stove in a county grocery. But," recalling himself loftily, and with a tolerant wave of his be-diamonded hand, "wot kin you expect from one of them cow counties? They ain't satisfied till they drive every gentleman out of the darned gopher-holes they call their 'kentry.'"

In her admiration of what she believed to be a loyal outburst for his friend, Phœbe overlooked the implied sneer at her provincial home. But her father went on with a perfunctory, exasperating, dusty aridity: —

"That mebbee ez mebbee, Mr. Hooker, but the story down in our precinct goes that she gave Mrs. Peyton the slip, — chucked up her situation as adopted darter, and went off with a queer sort of a cirkiss woman, — one of her own *kin*, and I reckon one of her own *kind*."

To this Mr. Hooker offered no further reply than a withering rebuke of the waiter, a genteel abstraction, and a lofty change of subject. He pressed upon them two tickets for the performance, of which he seemed to have a number neatly clasped in an india-rubber band, and advised them to come early. They would see him after the performance and sup together. He must leave them now, as he had to be punctually at the theatre, and if he lingered he should be pestered by interviewers. He withdrew under a dazzling display of cuff and white handkerchief, and with that inward swing of the arm and slight bowiness of the leg generally recognized in his profession as the lounging exit of high comedy.

The mingling of awe and an uneasy sense of changed relations which that meeting with Jim had brought to Phœbe was not lessened when she entered the theatre with her father that evening, and even Mr. Hopkins seemed to share her feelings. The theatre was large, and brilliant in decoration, the seats were well filled with the same heterogeneous mingling she had seen in the dining-room at the Placer Hotel, but in the parquet were some fashionable costumes and cultivated faces. Mr. Hopkins was not altogether so sure that Jim had been "only gassing." But the gorgeous drop curtain, representing an allegory of Californian prosperity and abundance, presently uprolled upon a scene of Western life almost as striking in its glaring unreality. From a rose-clad English cottage in a subtropical landscape skipped "Rosalie, the Prairie Flower." The briefest of skirts, the most unsullied of stockings, the tiniest of slippers, and the few diamonds that glittered on her fair neck and fingers, revealed at once the simple and unpretending daughter of the American backwoodsman. A tumult of delighted greeting broke from the audience. The bright color came to the pink, girlish cheeks, gratified vanity danced in her violet eyes, and as she piquantly bowed her acknowledgments, this great breath of praise seemed to transfigure and possess her. A very young actor who represented the giddy world in a straw hat with an effeminate manner was alternately petted and girded at by her during the opening exposition of the plot, until the statement that a "dark destiny" obliged her to follow her uncle in an emigrant train across the plains closed the act, apparently extinguished him, and left *her* the central figure. So far, she evidently was the favorite. A singular aversion to her crept into the heart of Phœbe.

But the second act brought an Indian attack upon the emigrant train, and here "Rosalie" displayed the archest heroism and the pinkest and most distracting self-posses-

sion, in marked contrast to the giddy worldling who, having accompanied her apparently for comic purposes best known to himself, cowered abjectly under wagons, and was pulled ignominiously out of straw, until Red Dick swept out of the wings with a chosen band and a burst of revolvers and turned the tide of victory. Attired as a picturesque combination of the Neapolitan smuggler, river-bar miner, and Mexican vaquero, Jim Hooker instantly began to justify the plaudits that greeted him and the most sanguinary hopes of the audience. A gloomy but fascinating cloud of gunpowder and dark intrigue from that moment hung about the stage.

Yet in this sombre obscuration Rosalie had passed a happy six months, coming out with her character and stockings equally unchanged and unblemished, to be rewarded with the hand of Red Dick and the discovery of her father, the governor of New Mexico, as a white-haired, but objectionable vaquero, at the fall of the curtain.

Through this exciting performance Phœbe sat with a vague and increasing sense of loneliness and distrust. She did not know that Hooker had added to his ordinary inventive exaggeration the form of dramatic composition. But she had early detected the singular fact that such shadowy outlines of plot as the piece possessed were evidently based on his previous narrative of his *own* experiences, and the saving of Susy Peyton — by himself! There was the episode of their being lost on the plains, as he had already related it to her, with the addition of a few years to Susy's age and some vivid picturesqueness to himself as Red Dick. She was not, of course, aware that the part of the giddy worldling was Jim's own conception of the character of Clarence. But what, even to her provincial taste, seemed the extravagance of the piece, she felt, in some way, reflected upon the truthfulness of the story she had heard. It seemed to be a parody on himself, and in the

laughter which some of the most thrilling points produced in certain of the audience, she heard an echo of her own doubts. But even this she could have borne if Jim's confidence had not been given to the general public; it was no longer *hers* alone, she shared it with them. And this strange, bold girl, who acted with him, — the "Blanche Belville" of the bills, — how often he must have told *her* the story, and yet how badly she had learned it! It was not her own idea of it, nor of *him*. In the last extravagant scene she turned her weary and half-shamed eyes from the stage and looked around the theatre. Among a group of loungers by the wall a face that seemed familiar was turned towards her own with a look of kindly and sympathetic recognition. It was the face of Clarence Brant. When the curtain fell, and she and her father rose to go, he was at their side. He seemed older and more superior looking than she had ever thought him before, and there was a gentle yet sad wisdom in his eyes and voice that comforted her even while it made her feel like crying.

"You are satisfied that no harm has come to our friend," he said pleasantly. "Of course you recognized him?"

"Oh, yes; we met him to-day," said Phœbe. Her provincial pride impelled her to keep up a show of security and indifference. "We are going to supper with him."

Clarence slightly lifted his brows.

"You are more fortunate than I am," he said smilingly. "I only arrived here at seven, and I must leave at midnight."

Phœbe hesitated a moment, then said with affected carelessness: —

"What do you think of the young girl who plays with him? Do you know her? Who is she?"

He looked at her quickly, and then said, with some surprise: —

"Did he not tell you?"

"No."

"She *was* the adopted daughter of Mrs. Peyton, — Miss Susan Silsbee," he said gravely.

"Then she *did* run away from home as they said," said Phœbe impulsively.

"Not *exactly* as they said," said Clarence gently. "She elected to make her home with her aunt, Mrs. McClosky, who is the wife of the manager of this theatre, and she adopted the profession a month ago. As it now appears that there was some informality in the old articles of guardianship, Mrs. Peyton would have been powerless to prevent her from doing either, even if she had wished to."

The infelicity of questioning Clarence regarding Susy suddenly flashed upon the forgetful Phœbe, and she colored. Yet, although sad, he did not look like a rejected lover.

"Of course, if she is here with her own relatives, that makes all the difference," she said gently. "It is protection."

"Certainly," said Clarence.

"And," continued Phœbe hesitatingly, "she is playing with — with — an old friend — Mr. Hooker!"

"That is quite proper, too, considering their relations," said Clarence tolerantly.

"I — don't — understand," stammered Phœbe.

The slightly cynical smile on Clarence's face changed as he looked into Phœbe's eyes.

"I've just heard that they are married," he returned gently

CHAPTER XII

NOWHERE had the long season of flowers brought such glory as to the broad plains and slopes of Robles Rancho. By some fortuitous chance of soil, or flood, or drifting pollen, the three terraces had each taken a distinct and separate blossom and tint of color. The straggling line of corral, the crumbling wall of the old garden, the out-lying chapel, and even the brown walls of the casa itself, were half sunken in the tall racemes of crowding lupines, until from the distance they seemed to be slowly settling in the profundity of a dark-blue sea. The second terrace was a league-long flow of gray and gold daisies, in which the cattle dazedly wandered mid-leg deep. A perpetual sunshine of yellow dandelions lay upon the third. The gentle slope to the dark-green cañada was a broad cataract of crimson poppies. Everywhere where water had stood, great patches of color had taken its place. It seemed as if the rains had ceased only that the broken heavens might drop flowers.

Never before had its beauty — a beauty that seemed built upon a cruel, youthful, obliterating forgetfulness of the past — struck Clarence as keenly as when he had made up his mind that he must leave the place forever. For the tale of his mischance and ill fortune, as told by Hopkins, was unfortunately true. When he discovered that in his desire to save Peyton's house by the purchase of the Sisters' title he himself had been the victim of a gigantic fraud, he accepted the loss of the greater part of his fortune with resignation, and was even satisfied by the

thought that he had at least effected the possession of the property for Mrs. Peyton. But when he found that those of his tenants who had bought under him had acquired only a dubious possession of their lands and no title, he had unhesitatingly reimbursed them for their improvements with the last of his capital. Only the lawless Gilroy had good-humoredly declined. The quiet acceptance of the others did not, unfortunately, preclude their settled belief that Clarence had participated in the fraud, and that even now his restitution was making a dangerous precedent, subversive of the best interests of the State, and discouraging to immigration. Some doubted his sanity. Only one, struck with the sincerity of his motive, hesitated to take his money, with a look of commiseration on his face.

"Are you not satisfied?" asked Clarence, smiling.

"Yes, but"—

"But what?"

"Nothin'. Only I was thinkin' that a man like you must feel awful lonesome in Calforny!"

Lonely he was, indeed; but his loneliness was not the loss of fortune nor what it might bring. Perhaps he had never fully realized his wealth; it had been an accident rather than a custom of his life, and when it had failed in the only test he had made of its power, it is to be feared that he only sentimentally regretted it. It was too early yet for him to comprehend the veiled blessings of the catastrophe in its merciful disruption of habits and ways of life; his loneliness was still the hopeless solitude left by vanished ideals and overthrown idols. He was satisfied that he had never cared for Susy, but he still cared for the belief that he had.

After the discovery of Pedro's body that fatal morning, a brief but emphatic interview between himself and Mrs. McClosky had followed. He had insisted upon her immediately accompanying Susy and himself to Mrs. Peyton in

San Francisco. Horror-stricken and terrified at the catastrophe, and frightened by the strange looks of the excited servants, they did not dare to disobey him. He had left them with Mrs. Peyton in the briefest preliminary interview, during which he spoke only of the catastrophe, shielding the woman from the presumption of having provoked it, and urging only the importance of settling the question of guardianship at once. It was odd that Mrs. Peyton had been less disturbed than he imagined she would be at even his charitable version of Susy's unfaithfulness to her; it even seemed to him that she had already suspected it. But as he was about to withdraw to leave her to meet them alone, she had stopped him suddenly.

"What would you advise me to do?"

It was his first interview with her since the revelation of his own feelings. He looked into the pleading, troubled eyes of the woman he now knew he had loved, and stammered: —

"You alone can judge. Only you must remember that one cannot force an affection any more than one can prevent it."

He felt himself blushing, and, conscious of the construction of his words, he even fancied that she was displeased.

"Then you have no preference?" she said, a little impatiently.

"None."

She made a slight gesture with her handsome shoulders, but she only said, "I should have liked to have pleased you in this," and turned coldly away. He had left without knowing the result of the interview; but a few days later he received a letter from her stating that she had allowed Susy to return to her aunt, and that she had resigned all claims to her guardianship.

"It seemed to be a foregone conclusion," she wrote; "and although I cannot think such a change will be for

her permanent welfare, it is her present *wish*, and who knows, indeed, if the change will be permanent? I have not allowed the legal question to interfere with my judgment, although her friends must know that she forfeits any claim upon the estate by her action; but at the same time, in the event of her suitable marriage, I should try to carry out what I believe would have been Mr. Peyton's wishes."

There were a few lines of postscript: "It seems to me that the change would leave you more free to consult your own wishes in regard to continuing your friendship with Susy, and upon such a footing as may please you. I judge from Mrs. McClosky's conversation that she believed you thought you were only doing your duty in reporting to me, and that the circumstances had not altered the good terms in which you all three formerly stood."

Clarence had dropped the letter with a burning indignation that seemed to sting his eyes until a scalding moisture hid the words before him. What might not Susy have said? What exaggeration of his affection was she not capable of suggesting? He recalled Mrs. McClosky, and remembered her easy acceptance of him as Susy's lover. What had they told Mrs. Peyton? What must be her opinion of his deceit towards herself? It was hard enough to bear this before he knew he loved her. It was intolerable now! And this is what she meant when she suggested that he should renew his old terms with Susy; it was for *him* that this ill-disguised, scornful generosity in regard to Susy's pecuniary expectations was intended. What should he do? He would write to her, and indignantly deny any clandestine affection for Susy. But could he do that, in honor, in truthfulness? Would it not be better to write and confess all? Yes, — *everything.*

Fortunately for his still boyish impulsiveness, it was at this time that the discovery of his own financial ruin came

to him. The inquest on the body of Pedro Valdez and the confession of his confidant had revealed the facts of the fraudulent title and forged testamentary documents. Although it was correctly believed that Pedro had met his death in an escapade of gallantry or intrigue, the coroner's jury had returned a verdict of "accidental death," and the lesser scandal was lost in the wider, far-spreading disclosure of fraud. When he had resolved to assume all the liabilities of his purchase, he was obliged to write to Mrs. Peyton and confess his ruin. But he was glad to remind her that it did not alter *her* status or security; he had only given her the possession, and she would revert to her original and now uncontested title But as there was now no reason for his continuing the stewardship, and as he must adopt some profession and seek his fortune elsewhere, he begged her to relieve him of his duty. Albeit written with a throbbing heart and suffused eyes, it was a plain, business-like, and practical letter. Her reply was equally cool and matter of fact. She was sorry to hear of his losses, although she could not agree with him that they could logically sever his present connection with the rancho, or that, placed upon another and distinctly business footing, the occupation would not be as remunerative to him as any other. But, of course, if he had a preference for some more independent position, that was another question, although he would forgive her for using the privilege of her years to remind him that his financial and business success had not yet justified his independence. She would also advise him not to decide hastily, or, at least, to wait until she had again thoroughly gone over her husband's papers with her lawyer, in reference to the old purchase of the Sisters' title, and the conditions under which it was bought. She knew that Mr. Brant would not refuse this as a matter of business, nor would that friendship, which she valued so highly, allow him to im-

peril the possession of the rancho by leaving it at such a moment. As soon as she had finished the examination of the papers, she would write again. Her letter seemed to leave him no hope, if, indeed, he had ever indulged in any. It was the practical kindliness of a woman of business, nothing more. As to the examination of her husband's papers, that was a natural precaution. He alone knew that they would give no record of a transaction which had never occurred. He briefly replied that his intention to seek another situation was unchanged, but that he would cheerfully await the arrival of his successor. Two weeks passed. Then Mr. Sanderson, Mrs. Peyton's lawyer, arrived, bringing an apologetic note from Mrs. Peyton. She was so sorry her business was still delayed, but as she had felt that she had no right to detain him entirely at Robles, she had sent to Mr. Sanderson to *temporarily* relieve him, that he might be free to look around him or visit San Francisco in reference to his own business, only extracting a promise from him that he would return to Robles to meet her at the end of the week, before settling upon anything.

The bitter smile with which Clarence had read thus far suddenly changed. Some mysterious touch of unbusiness-like but womanly hesitation, that he had never noticed in her previous letters, gave him a faint sense of pleasure, as if her note had been perfumed. He had availed himself of the offer. It was on this visit to Sacramento that he had accidentally discovered the marriage of Susy and Hooker.

"It 's a great deal better business for her to have a husband in the 'profesh' if she 's a-goin' to stick to it," said his informant, Mrs. McClosky, "and she 's nothing if she ain't business and profesh, Mr. Brant. I never see a girl that was born for the stage — yes, you might say jess cut out o' the boards of the stage — as that girl Susy is! And

that 's jest what 's the matter; and *you* know it, and *I* know it, and there you are!"

It was with these experiences that Clarence was to-day reëntering the wooded and rocky gateway of the rancho from the high road of the cañada; but as he cantered up the first slope, through the drift of scarlet poppies that almost obliterated the track, and the blue and yellow blooms of the terraces again broke upon his view, he thought only of Mrs. Peyton's pleasure in this changed aspect of her old home. She had told him of it once before, and of her delight in it; and he had once thought how happy he should be to see it with her.

The servant who took his horse told him that the señora had arrived that morning from Santa Inez, bringing with her the two Señoritas Hernandez from the rancho of Los Canejos, and that other guests were expected. And there was the Señor Sanderson and his Reverence Padre Esteban. Truly an affair of hospitality, the first since the padron died. Whatever dream Clarence might have had of opportunities for confidential interview was rudely dispelled. Yet Mrs. Peyton had left orders to be informed at once of Don Clarencio's arrival.

As he crossed the patio and stepped upon the corridor he fancied he already detected in the internal arrangements the subtle influence of Mrs. Peyton's taste and the indefinable domination of the mistress. For an instant he thought of anticipating the servant and seeking her in the boudoir, but some instinct withheld him, and he turned into the study which he had used as an office. It was empty; a few embers glimmered on the hearth. At the same moment there was a light step behind him, and Mrs. Peyton entered and closed the door behind her. She was very beautiful. Although paler and thinner, there was an odd sort of animation about her, so unlike her usual repose that it seemed almost feverish.

"I thought we could talk together a few moments before the guests arrive. The house will be presently so full, and my duties as hostess commence."

"I was — about to seek you — in — in the boudoir," hesitated Clarence.

She gave an impatient shiver.

"Good heavens, not there! I shall never go there again. I should fancy every time I looked out of the window that I saw the head of that man between the bars. No! I am only thankful that I was n't here at the time, and that I can keep my remembrance of the dear old place unchanged." She checked herself a little abruptly, and then added somewhat irrelevantly but cheerfully, "Well, you have been away? What have you done?"

"Nothing," said Clarence.

"Then you have kept your promise," she said, with the same nervous hilarity.

"I have returned here without making any other engagement," he said gravely; "but I have not altered my determination."

She shrugged her shoulders again, or, as it seemed, the skin of her tightly fitting black dress above them, with the sensitive shiver of a highly groomed horse, and moved to the hearth as if for warmth; put her slim, slippered foot upon the low fender, drawing, with a quick hand, the whole width of her skirt behind her until it clingingly accented the long, graceful curve from her hip to her feet. All this was so unlike her usual fastidiousness and repose that he was struck by it. With her eyes on the glowing embers of the hearth, and tentatively advancing her toe to its warmth and drawing it away, she said: —

"Of course, you must please yourself. I am afraid I have no right except that of habit and custom to keep you here; and you know," she added, with an only half-withheld bitterness, "that they are not always very effective

with young people who prefer to have the ordering of their own lives. But I have something still to tell you before you finally decide. I have, as you know, been looking over my — over Mr. Peyton's papers very carefully. Well, as a result, I find, Mr. Brant, that there is no record whatever of his wonderfully providential purchase of the Sisters' title from you; that he never entered into any written agreement with you, and never paid you a cent; and that, furthermore, his papers show me that he never even contemplated it; nor, indeed, even knew of *your* owning the title when he died. Yes, Mr. Brant, it was all to *your* foresight and prudence, and *your* generosity alone, that we owe our present possession of the rancho. When you helped us into that awful window, it was *your* house we were entering; and if it had been *you*, and not those wretches, who had chosen to shut the doors on us after the funeral, we could never have entered here again. Don't deny it, Mr. Brant. I have suspected it a long time, and when you spoke of changing *your* position, I determined to find out if it was n't *I* who had to leave the house rather than you. One moment, please. And I did find out, and it *was* I. Don't speak, please, yet. And now," she said, with a quick return to her previous nervous hilarity, "knowing this, as you did, and knowing, too, that I would know it when I examined the papers, — don't speak, I 'm not through yet, — don't you think that it was just a *little* cruel for you to try to hurry me, and make me come here instead of your coming to *me* in San Francisco, when I gave you leave for that purpose?"

"But, Mrs. Peyton," gasped Clarence.

"Please don't interrupt me," said the lady, with a touch of her old imperiousness, "for in a moment I must join my guests. When I found you would n't tell me, and left it to me to find out, I could only go away as I did, and really leave you to control what I believed was your own

property. And I thought, too, that I understood your motives, and, to be frank with you, *that* worried me; for I believed I knew the disposition and feelings of a certain person better than yourself."

"One moment," broke out Clarence, "you *must* hear me, now. Foolish and misguided as that purchase may have been, I swear to you I had only one motive in making it, — to save the homestead for you and your husband, who had been my first and earliest benefactors. What the result of it was, you, as a business woman, know; your friends know; your lawyer will tell you the same. You owe me nothing. I have given you nothing but the repossession of this property, which any other man could have done, and perhaps less stupidly than I did. I would not have forced you to come here to hear this if I had dreamed of your suspicions, or even if I had simply understood that you would see me in San Francisco as I passed through."

"Passed through? Where were you going?" she said quickly.

"To Sacramento."

The abrupt change in her manner startled him to a recollection of Susy, and he blushed. She bit her lips, and moved towards the window.

"Then you saw her?" she said, turning suddenly towards him. The inquiry of her beautiful eyes was more imperative than her speech.

Clarence recognized quickly what he thought was his cruel blunder in touching the half-healed wound of separation. But he had gone too far to be other than perfectly truthful now.

"Yes; I saw her on the stage," he said, with a return of his boyish earnestness; "and I learned something which I wanted you to first hear from me. She is *married*, — and to Mr. Hooker, who is in the same theatrical company with her. But I want you to think, as I honestly do,

that it is the best for her. She has married in her profession, which is a great protection and a help to her success, and she has married a man who can look lightly upon certain qualities in her that others might not be so lenient to. His worst faults are on the surface, and will wear away in contact with the world, and he looks up to her as his superior. I gathered this from her friend, for I did not speak with her myself; I did not go there to see her. But as I expected to be leaving you soon, I thought it only right that as I was the humble means of first bringing her into your life, I should bring you this last news, which I suppose takes her out of it forever. Only I want you to believe that *you* have nothing to regret, and that *she* is neither lost nor unhappy."

The expression of suspicious inquiry on her face when he began changed gradually to perplexity as he continued, and then relaxed into a faint, peculiar smile. But there was not the slightest trace of that pain, wounded pride, indignation, or anger, that he had expected to see upon it.

"That means, I suppose, Mr. Brant, that *you* no longer care for her?"

The smile had passed, yet she spoke now with a half-real, half-affected archness that was also unlike her.

"It means," said Clarence with a white face, but a steady voice, "that I care for her now as much as I ever cared for her, no matter to what folly it once might have led me. But it means, also, that there was no time when I was not able to tell it to *you* as frankly as I do now" —

"One moment, please," she interrupted, and turned quickly towards the door. She opened it and looked out. "I thought they were calling me, — and — I — I — *must* go now, Mr. Brant. And without finishing my business either, or saying half I had intended to say. But wait" — she put her hand to her head in a pretty perplexity, "it 's a moonlight night, and I 'll propose after dinner a

stroll in the gardens, and you can manage to walk a little with me." She stopped again, returned, said, "It was very kind of you to think of me at Sacramento," held out her hand, allowed it to remain for an instant, cool but acquiescent, in his warmer grasp, and with the same odd youthfulness of movement and gesture slipped out of the door.

An hour later she was at the head of her dinner table, serene, beautiful, and calm, in her elegant mourning, provokingly inaccessible in the sweet deliberation of her widowed years; Padre Esteban was at her side with a local magnate, who had known Peyton and his wife, while Donna Rosita and a pair of liquid-tongued, childlike señoritas were near Clarence and Sanderson. To the priest Mrs. Peyton spoke admiringly of the changes in the rancho and the restoration of the Mission Chapel, and together they had commended Clarence from the level of their superior passionless reserve and years. Clarence felt hopelessly young and hopelessly lonely; the naïve prattle of the young girls beside him appeared infantine. In his abstraction, he heard Mrs. Peyton allude to the beauty of the night, and propose that after coffee and chocolate the ladies should put on their wraps and go with her to the old garden. Clarence raised his eyes; she was not looking at him, but there was a slight consciousness in her face that was not there before, and the faintest color in her cheek, still lingering, no doubt, from the excitement of conversation.

It was a cool, tranquil, dewless night when they at last straggled out, mere black and white patches in the colorless moonlight. The brilliancy of the flower-hued landscape was subdued under its passive, pale austerity; even the gray and gold of the second terrace seemed dulled and confused. At any other time Clarence might have lingered over this strange effect, but his eyes followed only a tall

figure, in a long striped burnous, that moved gracefully beside the soutaned priest. As he approached, it turned towards him.

"Ah! here you are. I just told Father Esteban that you talked of leaving to-morrow, and that he would have to excuse me a few moments while you showed me what you had done to the old garden."

She moved beside him, and, with a hesitation that was not unlike a more youthful timidity, slipped her hand through his arm. It was for the first time, and, without thinking, he pressed it impulsively to his side. I have already intimated that Clarence's reserve was at times qualified by singular directness.

A few steps carried them out of hearing; a few more, and they seemed alone in the world. The long adobe wall glanced away emptily beside them, and was lost; the black shadows of the knotted pear-trees were beneath their feet. They began to walk with the slight affectation of treading the shadows as if they were patterns on a carpet. Clarence was voiceless, and yet he seemed to be moving beside a spirit that must be first addressed.

But it was flesh and blood nevertheless.

"I interrupted you in something you were saying when I left the office," she said quietly.

"I was speaking of Susy," returned Clarence eagerly; "and" —

"Then you need n't go on," interrupted Mrs. Peyton quickly. "I understand you, and believe you. I would rather talk of something else. We have not yet arranged how I can make restitution to you for the capital you sank in saving this place. You will be reasonable, Mr. Brant, and not leave me with the shame and pain of knowing that you ruined yourself for the sake of your old friends. For it is no more a sentimental idea of mine to feel in this way than it is a fair and sensible one for you to imply that

a mere quibble of construction absolves me from responsibility. Mr. Sanderson himself admits that the repossession you gave us is a fair and legal basis for any arrangement of sharing or division of the property with you, that might enable you to remain here and continue the work you have so well begun. Have you no suggestion, or must it come from *me*, Mr. Brant?"

"Neither. Let us not talk of that now."

She did not seem to notice the boyish doggedness of his speech, except so far as it might have increased her inconsequent and nervously pitched levity.

"Then suppose we speak of the Misses Hernandez, with whom you scarcely exchanged a word at dinner, and whom I invited for you and your fluent Spanish. They are charming girls, even if they are a little stupid. But what can I do? If I am to live here, I must have a few young people around me, if only to make the place cheerful for others. Do you know I have taken a great fancy to Miss Rogers, and have asked her to visit me. I think she is a good friend of yours, although perhaps she is a little shy. What's the matter? You have nothing against her, have you?"

Clarence had stopped short. They had reached the end of the pear-tree shadows. A few steps more would bring them to the fallen south wall of the garden and the open moonlight beyond, but to the right an olive alley of deeper shadow diverged.

"No," he said, with slow deliberation; "I have to thank Mary Rogers for having discovered something in me that I have been blindly, foolishly, and hopelessly struggling with."

"And, pray, what was that?" said Mrs. Peyton sharply.

"That I love you!"

Mrs. Peyton was fairly startled. The embarrassment of any truth is apt to be in its eternal abruptness, which no

deviousness of tact or circumlocution of diplomacy has ever yet surmounted. Whatever had been in her heart, or mind, she was unprepared for this directness. The bolt had dropped from the sky; they were alone; there was nothing between the stars and the earth but herself and this man and this truth; it could not be overlooked, surmounted, or escaped from. A step or two more would take her out of the garden into the moonlight, but always into this awful frankness of blunt and outspoken nature. She hesitated, and turned the corner into the olive shadows. It was, perhaps, more dangerous; but less shameless, and less like truckling. And the appallingly direct Clarence instantly followed.

"I know you will despise me, hate me; and, perhaps, worst of all, disbelieve me; but I swear to you, now, that I have always loved you, — yes, *always!* When first I came here, it was not to see my old playmate, but *you*, for I had kept the memory of you as I first saw you when a boy, and you have always been my ideal. I have thought of, dreamed of, worshiped, and lived for no other woman. Even when I found Susy again, grown up here at your side; even when I thought that I might, with your consent, marry her, it was that I might be with *you* always; that I might be a part of *your* home, your family, and have a place with her in *your* heart; for it was you I loved, and *you* only. Don't laugh at me, Mrs. Peyton, it is the truth, the whole truth, I am telling you. God help me!"

If she only *could* have laughed, — harshly, ironically, or even mercifully and kindly! But it would not come. And she burst out: —

"I am not laughing. Good heavens, don't you see? It is *me* you are making ridiculous."

"*You* ridiculous?" he said in a momentarily choked, half-stupefied voice. "You — a beautiful woman, my

superior in everything, the mistress of these lands where I am only steward — made ridiculous, not by my presumption, but by my confession? Was the saint you just now admired in Father Esteban's chapel ridiculous because of the peon clowns who were kneeling before it?"

"Hush! This is wicked! Stop!"

She felt she was now on firm ground, and made the most of it in voice and manner. She must draw the line somewhere, and she would draw it between passion and impiety.

"Not until I have told you all, and I *must* before I leave you. I loved you when I came here, — even when your husband was alive. Don't be angry, Mrs. Peyton; *he* would not, and need not, have been angry; he would have pitied the foolish boy, who, in the very innocence and ignorance of his passion, might have revealed it to him as he did to everybody but *one*. And yet, I sometimes think you might have guessed it, had you thought of me at all. It must have been on my lips that day I sat with you in the boudoir. I know that I was filled with it; with it and with you; with your presence, with your beauty, your grace of heart and mind, — yes, Mrs. Peyton, even with your own unrequited love for Susy. Only, then, I knew not what it was."

"But I think *I* can tell you what it was then, and now," said Mrs. Peyton, recovering her nervous little laugh, though it died a moment after on her lips. "I remember it very well. You told me then that *I reminded you of your mother*. Well, I am not old enough to be your mother, Mr. Brant, but I am old enough to have been, and might have been, the mother of your wife. That was what you meant then; that is what you mean now. I was wrong to accuse you of trying to make me ridiculous. I ask your pardon. Let us leave it as it was that day in the boudoir, as it is *now*. Let me still remind

you of your mother, — I know she must have been a good woman to have had so good a son, — and when you have found some sweet young girl to make you happy, come to me for a mother's blessing, and we will laugh at the recollection and misunderstanding of this evening."

Her voice did not, however, exhibit that exquisite maternal tenderness which the beatific vision ought to have called up, and the persistent voice of Clarence could not be evaded in the shadow.

"I said you reminded me of my mother," he went on at her side, "because I knew her and lost her only as a child. She never was anything to me but a memory, and yet an ideal of all that was sweet and lovable in woman. Perhaps it was a dream of what she might have been when she was as young in years as you. If it pleases you still to misunderstand me, it may please you also to know that there is a reminder of her even in this. I have no remembrance of a word of affection from her, nor a caress; I have been as hopeless in my love for her who was my mother, as for the woman I would make my wife."

"But you have seen no one, you know no one, you are young, you scarcely know your own self! You will forget this, you will forget *me!* And if — if — I should — listen to you, what would the world say, what would *you* yourself say a few years hence? Oh, be reasonable. Think of it, — it would be so wild, — so mad! so — so — utterly ridiculous!"

In proof of its ludicrous quality, two tears escaped her eyes in the darkness. But Clarence caught the white flash of her withdrawn handkerchief in the shadow, and captured her returning hand. It was trembling, but did not struggle, and presently hushed itself to rest in his.

"I 'm not only a fool but a brute," he said in a lower voice. "Forgive me. I have given you pain, — you, for whom I would have died."

They had both stopped. He was still holding her sleeping hand. His arm had stolen around the burnous so softly that it followed the curves of her figure as lightly as a fold of the garment, and was presumably unfelt. Grief has its privileges, and suffering exonerates a questionable situation. In another moment her fair head *might* have dropped upon his shoulder. But an approaching voice uprose in the adjoining broad allée. It might have been the world speaking through the voice of the lawyer Sanderson.

"Yes, he is a good fellow, and an intelligent fellow, too, but a perfect child in his experience of mankind."

They both started, but Mrs. Peyton's hand suddenly woke up and grasped his firmly. Then she said in a higher, but perfectly level tone: —

"Yes, I think with you we had better look at it again in the sunlight to-morrow. But here come our friends; they have probably been waiting for us to join them and go in."

. . . . . .

The wholesome freshness of early morning was in the room when Clarence awoke, cleared and strengthened. His resolution had been made. He would leave the rancho that morning, to enter the world again and seek his fortune elsewhere. This was only right to *her*, whose future it should never be said he had imperiled by his folly and inexperience; and if, in a year or two of struggle he could prove his right to address her again, he would return. He had not spoken to her since they had parted in the garden, with the grim truths of the lawyer ringing in his ears, but he had written a few lines of farewell, to be given to her after he had left. He was calm in his resolution, albeit a little pale and hollow-eyed for it.

He crept downstairs in the gray twilight of the scarce-awakened house, and made his way to the stables. Sad-

dling his horse, and mounting, he paced forth into the crisp morning air. The sun, just risen, was everywhere bringing out the fresh color of the flower-strewn terraces, as the last night's shadows, which had hidden them, were slowly beaten back. He cast a last look at the brown adobe quadrangle of the quiet house, just touched with the bronzing of the sun, and then turned his face towards the highway. As he passed the angle of the old garden he hesitated, but, strong in his resolution, he put the recollection of last night behind him, and rode by without raising his eyes.

"Clarence!"

It was *her* voice. He wheeled his horse. She was standing behind the grille in the old wall as he had seen her standing on the day he had ridden to his rendezvous with Susy. A Spanish manta was thrown over her head and shoulders, as if she had dressed hastily, and had run out to intercept him while he was still in the stable. Her beautiful face was pale in its black-hooded recess, and there were faint circles around her lovely eyes.

"You were going without saying 'good-by'!" she said softly.

She passed her slim white hand between the grating. Clarence leaped to the ground, caught it, and pressed it to his lips. But he did not let it go.

"No! no!" she said, struggling to withdraw it. "It is better as it is — as — as you have decided it to be. Only I could not let you go thus, — without a word. There now, — go, Clarence, go. Please! Don't you see I am behind these bars? Think of them as the years that separate us, my poor, dear, foolish boy. Think of them as standing between us, growing closer, heavier, and more cruel and hopeless as the years go on."

Ah, well! they had been good bars a hundred and fifty years ago, when it was thought as necessary to repress the

innocence that was behind them as the wickedness that was without. They had done duty in the convent at Santa Inez, and the monastery of Santa Barbara, and had been brought hither in Governor Micheltorrenas' time to keep the daughters of Robles from the insidious contact of the outer world, when they took the air in their cloistered pleasance. Guitars had tinkled against them in vain, and they had withstood the stress and storm of love tokens. But, like many other things which have had their day and time, they had retained their semblance of power, even while rattling loosely in their sockets, only because no one had ever thought of putting them to the test, and, in the strong hand of Clarence, assisted, perhaps, by the leaning figure of Mrs. Peyton, I grieve to say that the whole grille suddenly collapsed, became a frame of tinkling iron, and then clanked, bar by bar, into the road. Mrs. Peyton uttered a little cry and drew back, and Clarence, leaping the ruins, caught her in his arms.

For a moment only, for she quickly withdrew from them, and although the morning sunlight was quite rosy on her cheeks, she said gravely, pointing to the dismantled opening: —

"I suppose you *must* stay now, for you never could leave me here alone and defenseless."

He stayed. And with this fulfillment of his youthful dreams the romance of his young manhood seemed to be completed, and so closed the second volume of this trilogy. But what effect that fulfillment of youth had upon his maturer years, or the fortunes of those who were nearly concerned in it, may be told in a later and final chronicle.

CLARENCE

PART I

CHAPTER I

As Clarence Brant, President of the Robles Land Company, and husband of the rich widow of John Peyton, of the Robles Ranche, mingled with the outgoing audience of the Cosmopolitan Theatre, at San Francisco, he elicited the usual smiling nods and recognition due to his good looks and good fortune. But as he hurriedly slipped through the still lingering winter's rain into the smart coupé that was awaiting him, and gave the order "Home," the word struck him with a peculiarly ironical significance. His home was a handsome one, and lacked nothing in appointment and comfort, but he had gone to the theatre to evade its hollow loneliness. Nor was it because his wife was not there, for he had a miserable consciousness that her temporary absence had nothing to do with his homelessness. The distraction of the theatre over, that dull, vague, but aching sense of loneliness which was daily growing upon him returned with greater vigor.

He leaned back in the coupé and gloomily reflected.

He had been married scarcely a year, yet even in the illusions of the honeymoon the woman, older than himself, and the widow of his old patron, had half unconsciously reasserted herself, and slipped back into the domination of her old position. It was at first pleasant enough, — this half-maternal protectorate which is apt to mingle even with the affections of younger women, — and Clarence, in

his easy, half-feminine intuition of the sex, yielded, as the strong are apt to yield, through the very consciousness of their own superiority. But this is a quality the weaker are not apt to recognize, and the woman who has once tasted equal power with her husband not only does not easily relegate it, but even makes its continuance a test of the affections. The usual triumphant feminine conclusion, "Then you no longer love me," had in Clarence's brief experience gone even further and reached its inscrutable climax, "Then I no longer love you," although shown only in a momentary hardening of the eye and voice. And added to this was his sudden, but confused remembrance that he had seen that eye and heard that voice in marital altercation during Judge Peyton's life, and that he himself, her boy partisan, had sympathized with her. Yet, strange to say, this had given him more pain than her occasional other reversions to the past — to her old suspicions of him when he was a youthful protégé of her husband and a presumed suitor of her adopted daughter Susy. High natures are more apt to forgive wrong done to themselves than any abstract injustice. And her capricious tyranny over her dependents and servants, or an unreasoning enmity to a neighbor or friend, outraged his finer sense more than her own misconception of himself. Nor did he dream that this was a thing most women seldom understand, or, understanding, ever forgive.

The coupé rattled over the stones or swirled through the muddy pools of the main thoroughfares. Newspaper and telegraphic offices were still brilliantly lit, and crowds were gathered about the bulletin boards. He knew that news had arrived from Washington that evening of the first active outbreaks of secession, and that the city was breathless with excitement. Had he not just come from the theatre, where certain insignificant allusions in the play had been suddenly caught up and cheered or hissed by

hitherto unknown partisans, to the dumb astonishment of a majority of the audience comfortably settled to money-getting and their own affairs alone? Had he not applauded, albeit half-scornfully, the pretty actress — his old playmate Susy — who had audaciously and all incongruously waved the American flag in their faces? Yes! he had known it; had lived for the last few weeks in an atmosphere electrically surcharged with it — and yet it had chiefly affected him in his personal homelessness. For his wife was a Southerner, a born slaveholder, and a secessionist, whose noted prejudices to the North had even outrun her late husband's politics. At first the piquancy and recklessness of her opinionative speech amused him as part of her characteristic flavor, or as a lingering youthfulness which the maturer intellect always pardons. He had never taken her politics seriously — why should he? With her head on his shoulder he had listened to her extravagant diatribes against the North. He had forgiven her outrageous indictment of his caste and his associates for the sake of the imperious but handsome lips that uttered it. But when he was compelled to listen to her words echoed and repeated by her friends and family; when he found that with the clannishness of her race she had drawn closer to them in this controversy, — that she depended upon them for her intelligence and information rather than upon him, — he had awakened to the reality of his situation. He had borne the allusions of her brother, whose old scorn for his dependent childhood had been embittered by his sister's marriage and was now scarcely concealed. Yet, while he had never altered his own political faith and social creed in this antagonistic atmosphere, he had often wondered, with his old conscientiousness and characteristic self-abnegation, whether his own political convictions were not merely a revulsion from his domestic tyranny and alien surroundings.

In the midst of this gloomy retrospect the coupé stopped with a jerk before his own house. The door was quickly opened by a servant, who appeared to be awaiting him.

"Some one to see you in the library, sir," said the man, "and" — He hesitated and looked towards the coupé.

"Well?" said Clarence impatiently.

"He said, sir, as how you were not to send away the carriage."

"Indeed, and who is it?" demanded Clarence sharply.

"Mr. Hooker. He said I was to say Jim Hooker."

The momentary annoyance in Clarence's face changed to a look of reflective curiosity.

"He said he knew you were at the theatre, and he would wait until you came home," continued the man, dubiously watching his master's face. "He don't know you've come in, sir, and — and I can easily get rid of him."

"No matter now. I'll see him, and," added Clarence, with a faint smile, "let the carriage wait."

Yet, as he turned towards the library he was by no means certain that an interview with the old associate of his boyhood under Judge Peyton's guardianship would divert his mind. Yet he let no trace of his doubts nor of his past gloom show in his face as he entered the room.

Mr. Hooker was apparently examining the elegant furniture and luxurious accommodation with his usual resentful enviousness. Clarence had got a "soft thing." That it was more or less the result of his "artfulness," and that he was unduly "puffed up" by it, was, in Hooker's characteristic reasoning, equally clear. As his host smilingly advanced with outstretched hand, Mr. Hooker's efforts to assume a proper abstraction of manner and contemptuous indifference to Clarence's surroundings which should wound his vanity ended in his lolling back at full length in the chair with his eyes on the ceiling.

But, remembering suddenly that he was really the bearer of a message to Clarence, it struck him that his supine position was, from a theatrical view-point, infelicitous. In his experiences of the stage he had never delivered a message in that way. He rose awkwardly to his feet.

"It was so good of you to wait," said Clarence courteously.

"Saw you in the theatre," said Hooker brusquely. "Third row in parquet. Susy said it was you, and had suthin' to say to you. Suthin' you ought to know," he continued, with a slight return of his old mystery of manner which Clarence so well remembered. "You saw *her* — she fetched the house with that flag business, eh? She knows which way the cat is going to jump, you bet. I tell you, for all the blowing of these secessionists, the Union 's goin' to pay! Yes, sir!" He stopped, glanced round the handsome room, and added darkly, "Mebbee better than this."

With the memory of Hooker's characteristic fondness for mystery still in his mind, Clarence overlooked the innuendo, and said smilingly, —

"Why did n't you bring Mrs. Hooker here? I should have been honored with her company."

Mr. Hooker frowned slightly at this seeming levity.

"Never goes out after a performance. Nervous exhaustion. Left her at our rooms in Market Street. We can drive there in ten minutes. That 's why I asked to have the carriage wait."

Clarence hesitated. Without caring in the least to renew the acquaintance of his old playmate and sweetheart, a meeting that night in some vague way suggested to him a providential diversion. Nor was he deceived by any gravity in the message. With his remembrance of Susy's theatrical tendencies, he was quite prepared for any capricious futile extravagance.

"You are sure we will not disturb her?" he said politely.

"No."

Clarence led the way to the carriage. If Mr. Hooker expected him during the journey to try to divine the purport of Susy's message he was disappointed. His companion did not allude to it. Possibly looking upon it as a combined theatrical performance, Clarence preferred to wait for Susy as the better actor. The carriage rolled rapidly through the now deserted streets, and at last, under the directions of Mr. Hooker, who was leaning half out of the window, it drew up at a middle-class restaurant, above whose still lit and steaming windows were some ostentatiously public apartments, accessible from a side entrance. As they ascended the staircase together, it became evident that Mr. Hooker was scarcely more at his ease in the character of host than he had been as guest. He stared gloomily at a descending visitor, grunted audibly at a waiter in the passage, and stopped before a door, where a recently deposited tray displayed the half-eaten carcase of a fowl, an empty champagne bottle, two half-filled glasses, and a faded bouquet. The whole passage was redolent with a singular blending of damp cooking, stale cigarette smoke, and patchouli.

Putting the tray aside with his foot, Mr. Hooker opened the door hesitatingly and peered into the room, muttered a few indistinct words, which were followed by a rapid rustling of skirts, and then, with his hand still on the door-knob, turning to Clarence, who had discreetly halted on the threshold, flung the door open theatrically and bade him enter.

"She is somewhere in the suite," he added, with a large wave of the hand towards a door that was still oscillating. "Be here in a minute."

Clarence took in the apartment with a quiet glance. Its

furniture had the frayed and discolored splendors of a public parlor which had been privately used and maltreated; there were stains in the large medallioned carpet; the gilded veneer had been chipped from a heavy centre table, showing the rough, white deal beneath, which gave it the appearance of a stage "property;" the walls, paneled with gilt-framed mirrors, reflected every domestic detail or private relaxation with shameless publicity. A damp waterproof, shawl, and open newspaper were lying across the once brilliant sofa; a powder-puff, a plate of fruit, and a play-book were on the centre table, and on the marble-topped sideboard was Mr. Hooker's second-best hat, with a soiled collar, evidently but lately exchanged for the one he had on, peeping over its brim. The whole apartment seemed to mingle the furtive disclosures of the dressing-room with the open ostentations of the stage, with even a slight suggestion of the auditorium in a few scattered programmes on the floor and chairs.

The inner door opened again with a slight theatrical start, and Susy, in an elaborate dressing-gown, moved languidly into the room. She apparently had not had time to change her underskirt, for there was the dust of the stage on its delicate lace edging, as she threw herself into an armchair and crossed her pretty slippered feet before her. Her face was pale, its pallor incautiously increased by powder; and as Clarence looked at its still youthful, charming outline, he was not perhaps sorry that the exquisite pink and white skin beneath, which he had once kissed, was hidden from that awakened recollection. Yet there was little trace of the girlish Susy in the pretty, but prematurely jaded, actress before him, and he felt momentarily relieved. It was her youth and freshness appealing to his own youth and imagination that he had loved — not *her*. Yet as she greeted him with a slight exaggeration of glance, voice, and manner, he remembered that even as a girl she was an actress.

Nothing of this, however, was in his voice and manner as he gently thanked her for the opportunity of meeting her again. And he was frank, for the diversion he had expected he had found; he even was conscious of thinking more kindly of his wife who had supplanted her.

"I told Jim he must fetch you if he had to carry you," she said, striking the palm of her hand with her fan, and glancing at her husband. "I reckon he guessed *why*, though I did n't tell him — I don't tell Jim *everything*."

Here Jim rose, and looking at his watch, "guessed he 'd run over to the Lick House and get some cigars." If he was acting upon some hint from his wife, his simulation was so badly done that Clarence felt his first sense of uneasiness. But as Hooker closed the door awkwardly and unostentatiously behind him, Clarence smilingly said he had waited to hear the message from her own lips.

"Jim only knows what he 's heard outside: the talk of men, you know, — and he hears a good deal of that — more, perhaps, than *you* do. It was that which put me up to finding out the truth. And I did n't rest till I did. I 'm not to be fooled, Clarence, — you don't mind my calling you Clarence now we 're both married and done for, — and I 'm not the kind to be fooled by anybody from the Cow counties — and that 's the Robles Ranche. I 'm a Southern woman myself from Missouri, but I 'm for the Union first, last, and all the time, and I call myself a match for any lazy, dawdling, lash-swinging slaveholder and slaveholderess — whether they 're mixed blood, Heaven only knows, or what — or their friends or relations, or the dirty half-Spanish grandees and their mixed half-nigger peons who truckle to them. You bet!"

His blood had stirred quickly at the mention of the Robles Ranche, but the rest of Susy's speech was too much in the vein of her old extravagance to touch him seriously. He found himself only considering how strange it was that

the old petulance and impulsiveness of her girlhood were actually bringing back with them her pink cheeks and brilliant eyes.

"You surely did n't ask Jim to bring me here," he said smilingly, "to tell me that Mrs. Peyton" — he corrected himself hastily as a malicious sparkle came into Susy's blue eyes — "that my wife was a Southern woman, and probably sympathized with her class? Well, I don't know that I should blame her for that any more than she should blame me for being a Northern man and a Unionist."

"And she does n't blame you?" asked Susy sneeringly.

The color came slightly to Clarence's cheek, but before he could reply the actress added, —

"No, she prefers to use you!"

"I don't think I understand you," said Clarence, rising coldly.

"No, you don't understand *her!*" retorted Susy sharply. "Look here, Clarence Brant, you 're right; I did n't ask you here to tell you — what you and everybody knows — that your wife is a Southerner. I did n't ask you here to tell you what everybody suspects — that she turns you round her little finger. But I did ask you here to tell you what nobody, not even you, suspects — but what *I* know! — and that is that she 's a *traitor* — and more, a *spy!* — and that I 've only got to say the word, or send that man Jim to say the word, to have her dragged out of her Copperhead den at Robles Ranche and shut up in Fort Alcatraz this very night!"

Still with the pink glowing in her rounding cheek, and eyes snapping like splintered sapphires, she rose to her feet, with her pretty shoulders lifted, her small hands and white teeth both tightly clenched, and took a step towards him. Even in her attitude there was a reminiscence of her willful childhood, although still blended with the provincial actress whom he had seen on the stage only an

hour ago. Thoroughly alarmed at her threat, in his efforts to conceal his feelings he was not above a weak retaliation. Stepping back, he affected to regard her with a critical admiration that was only half simulated, and said with a smile, —

"Very well done — but you have forgotten the flag."

She did not flinch. Rather accepting the sarcasm as a tribute to her art, she went on with increasing exaggeration: "No, it is *you* who have forgotten the flag — forgotten your country, your people, your manhood — everything for that high-toned, double-dyed old spy and traitress! For while you are standing here, your wife is gathering under her roof at Robles a gang of spies and traitors like herself — secession leaders and their bloated, drunken 'chivalry!' Yes, you may smile your superior smile, but I tell you, Clarence Brant, that with all your smartness and book learning you know no more of what goes on around you than a child. But others do! This conspiracy is known to the government, the Federal officers have been warned; General Sumner has been sent out here — and his first act was to change the command at Fort Alcatraz, and send your wife's Southern friend — Captain Pinckney — to the right about! Yes — everything is known but *one* thing, and that is *where* and *how* this precious crew meet! That I alone know, and that I've told you!"

"And I suppose," said Clarence, with an unchanged smile, "that this valuable information came from your husband — my old friend, Jim Hooker?"

"No," she answered sharply, "it comes from Cencho — one of your own peons — who is more true to you and the old Rancho than *you* have ever been. He saw what was going on, and came to me, to warn you!"

"But why not to me directly?" asked Clarence, with affected incredulity.

"Ask him!" she said viciously. "Perhaps he did n't want to warn the master against the mistress. Perhaps he thought *we* are still friends. Perhaps" — she hesitated with a lower voice and a forced smile — "perhaps he used to see us together in the old times."

"Very likely," said Clarence quietly. "And for the sake of those old times, Susy," he went on, with a singular gentleness that was quite distinct from his paling face and set eyes, "I am going to forget all that you have just said of me and mine, in all the old willfulness and impatience that I see you still keep — with all your old prettiness." He took his hat from the table and gravely held out his hand.

She was frightened for a moment with his impassive abstraction. In the old days she had known it — had believed it was his dogged "obstinacy" — but she knew the hopelessness of opposing it. Yet with feminine persistency she again threw herself against it, as against a wall.

"You don't believe me! Well, go and see for yourself. They are at Robles *now*. If you catch the early morning stage at Santa Clara you will come upon them before they disperse. Dare you try it?"

"Whatever I do," he returned smilingly, "I shall always be grateful to you for giving me this opportunity of seeing you again *as you were*. Make my excuses to your husband. Good-night."

"Clarence!"

But he had already closed the door behind him. His face did not relax its expression nor change as he looked again at the tray with its broken viands before the door, the worn, stained hall carpet, or the waiter who shuffled past him. He was apparently as critically conscious of them and of the close odors of the hall, and the atmosphere of listless decay and faded extravagance around him, as

before the interview. But if the woman he had just parted from had watched him she would have supposed he still utterly disbelieved her story. Yet he was conscious that all that he saw was a part of his degradation, for he had believed every word she had uttered. Through all her extravagance, envy, and revengefulness he saw the central truth — that he had been deceived — not by his wife, but by himself! He had suspected all this before. This was what had been really troubling him — this was what he had put aside, rather than his faith, not in her, but in his ideal. He remembered letters that had passed between her and Captain Pinckney — letters that she had openly sent to notorious Southern leaders; her nervous anxiety to remain at the Rancho; the innuendoes and significant glances of friends which he had put aside — as he had this woman's message! Susy had told him nothing new of his wife — but the truth of *himself!* And the revelation came from people who he was conscious were the inferiors of himself and his wife. To an independent, proud, and self-made man it was the culminating stroke.

In the same abstracted voice he told the coachman to drive home. The return seemed interminable — though he never shifted his position. Yet when he drew up at his own door and looked at his watch he found he had been absent only half an hour. Only half an hour! As he entered the house he turned with the same abstraction towards a mirror in the hall, as if he expected to see some outward and visible change in himself in that time. Dismissing his servants to bed, he went into his dressing-room, completely changed his attire, put on a pair of long riding-boots, and throwing a serape over his shoulders, paused a moment, took a pair of small "Derringer" pistols from a box, put them in his pockets, and then slipped cautiously down the staircase. A lack of confidence in his

own domestics had invaded him for the first time. The lights were out. He silently opened the door and was in the street.

He walked hastily a few squares to a livery stable whose proprietor he knew. His first inquiry was for one "Redskin," a particular horse; the second for its proprietor. Happily both were in. The proprietor asked no question of a customer of Clarence's condition. The horse, half Spanish, powerful and irascible, was quickly saddled. As Clarence mounted, the man in an impulse of sociability said, —

"Saw you at the theatre to-night, sir."

"Ah," returned Clarence, quietly gathering up the reins.

"Rather a smart trick of that woman with the flag," he went on tentatively. Then, with a possible doubt of his customer's politics, he added with a forced smile, "I reckon it 's all party fuss, though; there ain't any real danger."

But fast as Clarence might ride the words lingered in his ears. He saw through the man's hesitation; he, too, had probably heard that Clarence Brant weakly sympathized with his wife's sentiments, and dared not speak fully. And he understood the cowardly suggestion that there was "no real danger." It had been Clarence's one fallacy. He had believed the public excitement was only a temporary outbreak of partisan feeling, soon to subside. Even now he was conscious that he was less doubtful of the integrity of the Union than of his own household. It was not the devotion of the patriot, but the indignation of an outraged husband, that was spurring him on.

He knew that if he reached Woodville by five o'clock he could get ferried across the bay at the Embarcadero, and catch the down coach to Fair Plains, whence he could ride to the Rancho. As the coach did not connect directly

with San Francisco, the chance of his surprising them was greater. Once clear of the city outskirts, he bullied Redskin into irascible speed, and plunged into the rainy darkness of the highroad. The way was familiar. For a while he was content to feel the buffeting, caused by his rapid pace, of wind and rain against his depressed head and shoulders in a sheer brutal sense of opposition and power, or to relieve his pent-up excitement by dashing through overflowed gullies in the road or across the quaggy, sodden edges of meadowland, until he had controlled Redskin's rebellious extravagance into a long steady stride. Then he raised his head and straightened himself on the saddle, to think. But to no purpose. He had no plan; everything would depend upon the situation; the thought of forestalling any action of the conspirators, by warning or calling in the aid of the authorities, for an instant crossed his mind, but was as instantly dismissed. He had but an instinct — to see with his own eyes what his reason told him was true. Day was breaking through drifting scud and pewter-colored clouds as he reached Woodville ferry, checkered with splashes of the soil and the spume of his horse, from whose neck and flanks the sweat rolled like lather. Yet he was not conscious how intent had been his purpose until he felt a sudden instinctive shock on seeing that the ferryboat was gone. For an instant his wonderful self-possession abandoned him; he could only gaze vacantly at the leaden-colored bay, without a thought or expedient. But in another moment he saw that the boat was returning from the distance. Had he lost his only chance? He glanced hurriedly at his watch; he had come more quickly than he imagined; there would still be time. He beckoned impatiently to the ferryman; the boat — a ship's pinnace, with two men in it — crept in with exasperating slowness. At last the two rowers suddenly leaped ashore.

"Ye might have come before, with the other passenger. We don't reckon to run lightnin' trips on this ferry."

But Clarence was himself again. "Twenty dollars for two more oars in that boat," he said quietly, "and fifty if you get me over in time to catch the down stage."

The man glanced at Clarence's eyes. "Run up and rouse out Jake and Sam," he said to the other boatman; then more leisurely, gazing at his customer's travel-stained equipment, he said, "There must have been a heap o' passengers got left by last night's boat. You 're the second man that took this route in a hurry."

At any other time the coincidence might have struck Clarence. But he only answered curtly, "Unless we are under way in ten minutes you will find I am *not* the second man, and that our bargain 's off."

But here two men emerged from the shanty beside the ferryhouse, and tumbled sleepily into the boat. Clarence seized an extra pair of sculls that were standing against the shed, and threw them into the stern. "I don't mind taking a hand myself for exercise," he said quietly.

The ferryman glanced again at Clarence's travel-worn figure and determined eyes with mingled approval and surprise. He lingered a moment with his oars lifted, looking at his passenger. "It ain't no business o' mine, young man," he said deliberately, "but I reckon you understand me when I say that I 've just taken another man over there."

"I do," said Clarence impatiently.

"And you still want to go?"

"Certainly," replied Clarence, with a cold stare, taking up his oars.

The man shrugged his shoulders, bent himself for the stroke, and the boat sprung forward. The others rowed strongly and rapidly, the tough ashen blades springing like steel from the water, the heavy boat seeming to leap in

successive bounds until they were fairly beyond the curving nshore current and clearing the placid, misty surface of he bay. Clarence did not speak, but bent abstractedly ver his oar; the ferryman and his crew rowed in equal anting silence; a few startled ducks whirred before them, ut dropped again to rest. In half an hour they were at he Embarcadero. The time was fairly up. Clarence's yes were eagerly bent for the first appearance of the stage-oach around the little promontory; the ferryman was as eagerly scanning the bare, empty street of the still sleeping settlement.

"I don't see him anywhere," said the ferryman with a glance, half of astonishment and half of curiosity, at his solitary passenger.

"See whom?" asked Clarence carelessly, as he handed the man his promised fee.

"The other man I ferried over to catch the stage. He must have gone on without waiting. You're in luck, young fellow!"

"I don't understand you," said Clarence impatiently. "What has your previous passenger to do with me?"

"Well, I reckon you know best. He's the kind of man, gin'rally speaking, that other men, in a pow'ful hurry, don't care to meet — and, as a rule, don't *foller* arter. It's gin'rally the other way."

"What do you mean?" inquired Clarence sternly. "Of whom are you speaking?"

"The Chief of Police of San Francisco!"

CHAPTER II

The laugh that instinctively broke from Clarence's lips was so sincere and unaffected that the man was disconcerted, and at last joined in it, a little shamefacedly. The grotesque blunder of being taken as a fugitive from justice relieved Clarence's mind from its acute tension, — he was momentarily diverted, — and it was not until the boatman had departed, and he was again alone, that it seemed to have any collateral significance. Then an uneasy recollection of Susy's threat that she had the power to put his wife in Fort Alcatraz came across him. Could she have already warned the municipal authorities and this man? But he quickly remembered that any action from such a warning could only have been taken by the United States Marshal, and not by a civic official, and dismissed the idea.

Nevertheless, when the stage with its half-spent lamps still burning dimly against the morning light swept round the curve and rolled heavily up to the rude shanty which served as coach-office, he became watchful. A single yawning individual in its doorway received a few letters and parcels, but Clarence was evidently the *only* waiting passenger. Any hope that he might have entertained that his mysterious predecessor would emerge from some seclusion at that moment was disappointed. As he entered the coach he made a rapid survey of his fellow-travelers, but satisfied himself that the stranger was not among them. They were mainly small traders or farmers, a miner or two, and apparently a Spanish-American of better degree and

personality. Possibly the circumstance that men of this class usually preferred to travel on horseback and were rarely seen in public conveyances attracted his attention, and their eyes met more than once in mutual curiosity. Presently Clarence addressed a remark to the stranger in Spanish; he replied fluently and courteously, but at the next stopping-place he asked a question of the expressman in an unmistakable Missouri accent. Clarence's curiosity was satisfied; he was evidently one of those early American settlers who had been so long domiciled in Southern California as to adopt the speech as well as the habiliments of the Spaniard.

The conversation fell upon the political news of the previous night, or rather seemed to be lazily continued from some previous, more excited discussion, in which one of the contestants — a red-bearded miner — had subsided into an occasional growl of surly dissent. It struck Clarence that the Missourian had been an amused auditor and even, judging from a twinkle in his eye, a mischievous instigator of the controversy. He was not surprised, therefore, when the man turned to him with a certain courtesy and said, —

"And what, sir, is the political feeling in *your* district?"

But Clarence was in no mood to be drawn out, and replied, almost curtly, that as he had come only from San Francisco, they were probably as well informed on that subject as himself. A quick and searching glance from the stranger's eye made him regret his answer, but in the silence that ensued the red-bearded miner, evidently still rankling at heart, saw his opportunity. Slapping his huge hands on his knees, and leaning far forward until he seemed to plunge his flaming beard, like a firebrand, into the controversy, he said grimly, —

"Well, I kin tell you, gen'l'men, *this*. It ain't goin'

to be no matter wot 's the *political feeling* here or thar — it ain't goin' to be no matter wot 's the State's rights and wot 's Fed'ral rights — it ain't goin' to be no question whether the gov'ment 's got the right to relieve its own soldiers that those Secesh is besieging in Fort Sumter or whether they have n't — but the first gun that 's fired at the flag blows the chains off every d—n nigger south of Mason and Dixon's line! You hear me! I 'm shoutin'! And whether you call yourselves 'Secesh' or 'Union' or 'Copperhead' or 'Peace men,' you 've got to face it!"

There was an angry start in one or two of the seats; one man caught at the swinging side-strap and half rose, a husky voice began, "It 's a d—d" — and then all as suddenly subsided. Every eye was turned to an insignificant figure in the back seat. It was a woman, holding a child on her lap, and gazing out of the window with her sex's profound unconcern in politics. Clarence understood the rude chivalry of the road well enough to comprehend that this unconscious but omnipotent figure had more than once that day controlled the passions of the disputants. They dropped back wearily to their seats, and their mutterings rolled off in the rattle of the wheels. Clarence glanced at the Missourian; he was regarding the red-bearded miner with a singular curiosity.

The rain had ceased, but the afternoon shadows were deepening when they at last reached Fair Plains, where Clarence expected to take horse to the Rancho. He was astonished, however, to learn that all the horses in the stable were engaged, but remembering that some of his own stock were in pasturage with a tenant at Fair Plains, and that he should probably have a better selection, he turned his steps thither. Passing out of the stable-yard he recognized the Missourian's voice in whispered conversation with the proprietor, but the two men withdrew into the shadow as he approached. An ill-defined uneasiness

came over him; he knew the proprietor, who also seemed to know the Missourian, and this evident avoidance of him was significant. Perhaps his reputation as a doubtful Unionist had preceded him, but this would not account for their conduct in a district so strongly Southern in sympathy as Fair Plains. More impressed by the occurrence than he cared to admit, when at last, after some delay, he had secured his horse, and was once more in the saddle, he kept a sharp lookout for his quondam companion. But here another circumstance added to his suspicions; there was a main road leading to Santa Inez, the next town, and the Rancho, and this Clarence had purposely taken in order to watch the Missourian; but there was also a cut-off directly to the Rancho, known only to the habitués of the Rancho. After a few moments' rapid riding on a mustang much superior to any in the hotel stables, he was satisfied that the stranger must have taken the cut-off. Putting spurs to his horse he trusted still to precede him to the Rancho — if that were his destination.

As he dashed along the familiar road, by a strange perversity of fancy, instead of thinking of his purpose, he found himself recalling the first time he had ridden that way in the flush of his youth and hopefulness. The girl-sweetheart he was then going to rejoin was now the wife of another; the woman who had been her guardian was now his own wife. He had accepted without a pang the young girl's dereliction, but it was through her revelation that he was now about to confront the dereliction of his own wife. And this was the reward of his youthful trust and loyalty! A bitter laugh broke from his lips. It was part of his still youthful self-delusion that he believed himself wiser and stronger for it.

It was quite dark when he reached the upper field or first terrace of the Rancho. He could see the white walls of the casa rising dimly out of the green sea of early wild

grasses, like a phantom island. It was here that the cut-off joined the main road — now the only one that led to the casa. He was satisfied that no one could have preceded him from Fair Plains; but it was true that he must take precautions against his own discovery. Dismounting near a clump of willows, he unsaddled and unbridled his horse, and with a cut of the riata over its haunches sent it flying across the field in the direction of a band of feeding mustangs, which it presently joined. Then, keeping well in the shadow of a belt of shrub-oaks, he skirted the long lesser terraces of the casa, intending to approach the house by way of the old garden and corral. A drizzling rain, occasionally driven by the wind into long, misty, curtain-like waves, obscured the prospect and favored his design. He reached the low adobe wall of the corral in safety; looking over he could detect, in spite of the darkness, that a number of the horses were of alien brands, and even recognized one or two from the Santa Inez district. The vague outline of buggies and carryalls filled the long shed beside the stables. There *was* company at the casa — so far Susy was right!

Nevertheless, lingering still by the wall of the old garden for the deepening of night, his nervous feverishness was again invaded and benumbed by sullen memories. There was the opening left by the old grille in the wall, behind which Mrs. Peyton stood on the morning when he thought he was leaving the ranch forever; where he had first clasped her in his arms, and stayed. A turn of the head, a moment's indecision, a single glance of a languorous eye, had brought this culmination. And now he stood again before that ruined grille, his house and lands, even his *name*, misused by a mad, scheming enthusiast, and himself a creeping spy of his own dishonor! He turned with a bitter smile again to the garden. A few dark red Castilian roses still leaned forward and swayed in the wind

with dripping leaves. It was here that the first morning of his arrival he had kissed Susy; the perfume and color of her pink skin came back to him with a sudden shock as he stood there; he caught at a flower, drew it towards him, inhaled its odor in a long breath that left him faint and leaning against the wall. Then again he smiled, but this time more wickedly — in what he believed his cynicism had sprung up the first instinct of revenge!

It was now dark enough for him to venture across the carriage road and make his way to the rear of the house. His first characteristic instinct had been to enter openly at his own front gate, but the terrible temptation to overhear and watch the conspiracy unobserved — that fascination common to deceived humanity to witness its own shame — had now grown upon him. He knew that a word or gesture of explanation, apology, appeal, or even terror from his wife would check his rage and weaken his purpose. His perfect knowledge of the house and the security of its inmates would enable him from some obscure landing or gallery to participate in any secret conclave they might hold in the patio — the only place suitable for so numerous a rendezvous. The absence of light in the few external windows pointed to this central gathering. And he had already conceived his plan of entrance.

Gaining the rear wall of the casa he began cautiously to skirt its brambly base until he had reached a long, oven-like window half obliterated by a monstrous passion vine. It was the window of what had once been Mrs. Peyton's boudoir; the window by which he had once forced an entrance to the house when it was in the hands of squatters, the window from which Susy had signaled her Spanish lover, the window whose grating had broken the neck of Judge Peyton's presumed assassin. But these recollections no longer delayed him; the moment for action had arrived. He knew that since the tragedy the boudoir had been dis-

mantled and shunned; the servants believed it to be haunted by the assassin's ghost. With the aid of the passion vine the ingress was easy; the interior window was open; the rustle of dead leaves on the bare floor as he entered, and the whir of a frightened bird by his ear, told the story of its desolation and the source of the strange noises that had been heard there. The door leading to the corridor was lightly bolted, merely to keep it from rattling in the wind. Slipping the bolt with the blade of his pocket-knife he peered into the dark passage. The light streaming under a door to the left, and the sound of voices, convinced him that his conjecture was right, and the meeting was gathered on the broad balconies around the patio. He knew that a narrow gallery, faced with Venetian blinds to exclude the sun, looked down upon them. He managed to gain it without discovery; luckily the blinds were still down; between their slats, himself invisible, he could hear and see everything that occurred.

Yet even at this supreme moment the first thing that struck him was the almost ludicrous contrast between the appearance of the meeting and its tremendous object. Whether he was influenced by any previous boyish conception of a clouded and gloomy conspiracy he did not know, but he was for an instant almost disconcerted by the apparent levity and festivity of the conclave. Decanters and glasses stood on small tables before them; nearly all were drinking and smoking. They comprised fifteen or twenty men, some of whose faces were familiar to him elsewhere as Southern politicians; a few, he was shocked to see, were well-known Northern Democrats. Occupying a characteristically central position was the famous Colonel Starbottle, of Virginia. Jaunty and youthful-looking in his mask-like, beardless face, expansive and dignified in his middle-aged port and carriage, he alone retained some of the importance — albeit slightly theatrical and affected —

of the occasion. Clarence in his first hurried glance had not observed his wife, and for a moment had felt relieved; but as Colonel Starbottle arose at that moment, and with a studiously chivalrous and courtly manner turned to his right, he saw that she was sitting at the further end of the balcony, and that a man whom he recognized as Captain Pinckney was standing beside her. The blood quickly tightened around his heart, but left him cold and observant.

"It was seldom, indeed," remarked Colonel Starbottle, placing his fat fingers in the frill of his shirt front, "that a movement like this was graced with the actual presence of a lofty, inspiring, yet delicate spirit — a Boadicea — indeed, he might say a Joan of Arc — in the person of their charming hostess, Mrs. Brant. Not only were they favored by her social and hospitable ministration, but by her active and enthusiastic coöperation in the glorious work they had in hand. It was through her correspondence and earnest advocacy that they were to be favored to-night with the aid and counsel of one of the most distinguished and powerful men in the Southern district of California, Judge Beeswinger, of Los Angeles. He had not the honor of that gentleman's personal acquaintance; he believed he was not far wrong in saying that this was also the misfortune of every gentleman present; but the name itself was a tower of strength. He would go further, and say that Mrs. Brant herself was personally unacquainted with him, but it was through the fervor, poetry, grace, and genius of her correspondence with that gentleman that they were to have the honor of his presence that very evening. It was understood that advices had been received of his departure, and that he might be expected at Robles at any moment."

"But what proof have we of Judge Beeswinger's soundness?" said a lazy Southern voice at the conclusion of Colonel Starbottle's periods. "Nobody here seems to

know him by sight: is it not risky to admit a man to our meeting whom we are unable to identify?"

"I reckon nobody but a fool or some prying mudsill of a Yankee would trust his skin here," returned another; "and if he did we 'd know what to do with him."

But Clarence's attention was riveted on his wife, and the significant speech passed him as unheeded as had the colonel's rhetoric. She was looking very handsome and slightly flushed, with a proud light in her eyes that he had never seen before. Absorbed in the discussion, she seemed to be paying little attention to Captain Pinckney as she rose suddenly to her feet.

"Judge Beeswinger will be attended here by Mr. MacNiel, of the Fair Plains Hotel, who will vouch for him and introduce him," she said in a clear voice, which rang with an imperiousness that Clarence well remembered. "The judge was to arrive by the coach from Martinez to Fair Plains, and is due now."

"Is there no *gentleman* to introduce him? Must we take him on the word of a common trader — by Jove! a whiskey-seller?" continued the previous voice sneeringly.

"On the word of a lady, Mr. Brooks," said Captain Pinckney, with a slight gesture towards Mrs. Brant — "who answers for both."

Clarence had started slightly at his wife's voice and the information it conveyed. His fellow-passenger, and the confidant of MacNiel, was the man they were expecting! If they had recognized him, Clarence, would they not warn the company of his proximity? He held his breath as the sound of voices came from the outer gate of the courtyard. Mrs. Brant rose; at the same moment the gate swung open, and a man entered. It *was* the Missourian.

He turned with old-fashioned courtesy to the single woman standing on the balcony.

"My fair correspondent, I believe! I am Judge Bee-

swinger. Your agent, MacNiel, passed me through your guards at the gate, but I did not deem it advisable to bring him into this assembly of gentlemen without your further consideration. I trust I was right."

The quiet dignity and self-possession, the quaint, old-fashioned colonial precision of speech, modified by a soft Virginian intonation, and, above all, some singular individuality of the man himself, produced a profound sensation, and seemed to suddenly give the gathering an impressiveness it had lacked before. For an instant Clarence forgot himself and his personal wrongs in the shock of indignation he felt at this potent addition to the ranks of his enemies. He saw his wife's eyes sparkle with pride over her acquisition, and noticed that Pinckney cast a disturbed glance at the newcomer.

The stranger ascended the few steps to the balcony and took Mrs. Brant's hand with profound courtesy. "Introduce me to my colleagues — distinctly and separately. It behooves a man at such a moment to know to whom he intrusts his life and honor, and the life and honor of his cause."

It was evidently no mere formal courtesy to the stranger. As he stepped forward along the balcony, and under Mrs. Brant's graceful guidance was introduced to each of the members, he not only listened with scrupulous care and attention to the name and profession of each man, but bent upon him a clear, searching glance that seemed to photograph him in his memory. With two exceptions. He passed Colonel Starbottle's expanding shirt frill with a bow of elaborate precision, and said, "Colonel Starbottle's fame requires neither introduction nor explanation." Before Captain Pinckney he paused.

"An officer of the United States army, I believe, sir?"

"Yes."

"Educated at West Point, I think, by the government, to whom you have taken the oath of allegiance?"

"Yes."

"Very good, sir," said the stranger, turning away.

"You have forgotten one other fact, sir," said Pinckney, with a slightly supercilious air.

"Indeed! What is it?"

"I am, first of all, a native of the State of South Carolina!"

A murmur of applause and approval ran round the balcony. Captain Pinckney smiled and exchanged glances with Mrs. Brant, but the stranger quietly returned to the central table beside Colonel Starbottle. "I am not only an unexpected delegate to this august assembly, gentlemen," he began gravely, "but I am the bearer of perhaps equally unexpected news. By my position in the Southern district I am in possession of dispatches received only this morning by pony express. Fort Sumter has been besieged. The United States flag, carrying relief to the beleaguered garrison, has been fired upon by the State of South Carolina."

A burst of almost hysteric applause and enthusiasm broke from the assembly, and made the dim, vault-like passages and corridors of the casa ring. Cheer after cheer went up to the veiled gallery and the misty sky beyond. Men mounted on the tables and waved their hands frantically, and in the midst of this bewildering turbulence of sound and motion Clarence saw his wife mounted on a chair, with burning cheeks and flashing eyes, waving her handkerchief like an inspired priestess. Only the stranger, still standing beside Colonel Starbottle, remained unmoved and impassive. Then, with an imperative gesture, he demanded a sudden silence.

"Convincing and unanimous as this demonstration is, gentlemen," he began quietly, "it is my duty, nevertheless, to ask you if you have seriously considered the meaning of the news I have brought. It is my duty to tell you

that it means civil war. It means the clash of arms between two sections of a mighty country; it means the disruption of friends, the breaking of family ties, the separation of fathers and sons, of brothers and sisters — even, perhaps, to the disseverment of husband and wife!"

"It means the sovereignty of the South — and the breaking of a covenant with low-born traders and abolitionists," said Captain Pinckney.

"If there are any gentlemen present," continued the stranger, without heeding the interruption, "who have pledged this State to the support of the South in this emergency, or to the establishment of a Pacific republic in aid and sympathy with it, whose names are on this paper" — he lifted a sheet of paper lying before Colonel Starbottle — "but who now feel that the gravity of the news demands a more serious consideration of the purpose, they are at liberty to withdraw from the meeting, giving their honor, as Southern gentlemen, to keep the secret intact."

"Not if I know it," interrupted a stalwart Kentuckian, as he rose to his feet and strode down the steps to the patio. "For," he added, placing his back against the gateway, "I 'll shoot the first coward that backs out now."

A roar of laughter and approval followed, but was silenced again by the quiet, unimpassioned voice of the stranger. "If, on the other hand," he went on calmly, "you all feel that this news is the fitting culmination and consecration of the hopes, wishes, and plans of this meeting, you will assert it again, over your own signatures, to Colonel Starbottle at this table."

When the Kentuckian had risen, Clarence had started from his concealment; when he now saw the eager figures pressing forward to the table he hesitated no longer. Slipping along the passage, he reached the staircase which led to the corridor in the rear of the balcony. Descending this rapidly, he not only came upon the backs of the

excited crowd around the table, but even elbowed one of the conspirators aside without being noticed. His wife, who had risen from her chair at the end of the balcony, was already moving towards the table. With a quick movement he seized her wrist, and threw her back in the chair again. A cry broke from her lips as she recognized him, but, still holding her wrist, he stepped quickly between her and the astonished crowd. There was a moment of silence, then the cry of "Spy!" and "Seize him!" rose quickly, but above all the voice of the Missourian was heard commanding them to stand back. Turning to Clarence, he said quietly, —

"I should know your face, sir. Who are you?"

"The husband of this woman and the master of this house," said Clarence as quietly, but in a voice he hardly recognized as his own.

"Stand aside from her, then — unless you are hoping that her danger may protect *you!*" said the Kentuckian, significantly drawing his revolver.

But Mrs. Brant sprang suddenly to her feet beside Clarence.

"We are neither of us cowards, Mr. Brooks — though he speaks the truth — and — more shame to me" — she added, with a look of savage scorn at Clarence — "*is my husband!*"

"What is your purpose in coming here?" continued Judge Beeswinger, with his eyes fixed on Clarence.

"I have given you all the information," said Clarence quietly, "that is necessary to make you, as a gentleman, leave this house at once — and that is my purpose. It is all the information you will get from me as long as you and your friends insult my roof with your uninvited presence. What I may have to say to you and each of you hereafter — what I may choose to demand of you, according to your own code of honor," — he fixed his eyes on Captain Pinck-

ney's — "is another question, and one not usually discussed before a lady."

"Pardon me. A moment — a single moment."

It was the voice of Colonel Starbottle; it was the frilled shirt front, the lightly buttoned blue coat with its expanding lapels, like bursting petals, and the smiling mask of that gentleman rising above the table and bowing to Clarence Brant and his wife with infinite courtesy. "The — er — humiliating situation in which we find ourselves, gentlemen, — the reluctant witnesses of — er — what we trust is only a temporary disagreement between our charming hostess and the — er — gentleman whom she recognized under the highest title to our consideration, — is distressing to us all, and would seem to amply justify that gentleman's claims to a personal satisfaction, which I know we would all delight to give. But that situation rests upon the supposition that our gathering here was of a purely social or festive nature! It may be," continued the colonel with a blandly reflective air, "that the spectacle of these decanters and glasses, and the nectar furnished us by our Hebe-like hostess" (he lifted a glass of whiskey and water to his lips while he bowed to Mrs. Brant gracefully), "has led the gentleman to such a deduction. But when I suggest to him that our meeting was of a business, or private nature, it strikes me that the question of intrusion may be fairly divided between him and ourselves. We may be even justified, in view of that privacy, in asking him if his — er — entrance to this house was — er — coincident with his appearance among us."

"With my front door in possession of strangers," said Clarence, more in reply to a sudden contemptuous glance from his wife than Starbottle's insinuation, "I entered the house through the window."

"Of my boudoir, where another intruder once broke his neck," interrupted his wife with a mocking laugh.

"Where I once helped this lady to regain possession of her house when it was held by another party of illegal trespassers, who, however, were content to call themselves 'jumpers,' and did not claim the privacy of gentlemen."

"Do you mean to imply, sir," began Colonel Starbottle haughtily, "that" —

"I mean to imply, sir," said Clarence with quiet scorn, "that I have neither the wish to know nor the slightest concern in any purpose that brought you here, and that when you quit the house you take your secrets and your privacy with you intact without let or hindrance from me."

"Do you mean to say, Mr. Brant," said Judge Beeswinger, suppressing the angry interruption of his fellows with a dominant wave of his hand, as he fixed his eyes on Clarence keenly, "that you have no sympathy with your wife's political sentiments?"

"I have already given you the information necessary to make you quit this house, and that is all you have a right to know," returned Clarence with folded arms.

"But *I* can answer for him," said Mrs. Brant, rising, with a quivering voice and curling lip. "There *is* no sympathy between us. We are as far apart as the poles. We have nothing in common but this house and his name."

"But you are husband and wife, bound together by a sacred compact."

"A compact!" echoed Mrs. Brant, with a bitter laugh. "Yes, the compact that binds South Carolina to the nigger-worshiping Massachusetts. The compact that links together white and black, the gentleman and the trader, the planter and the poor white — the compact of those *United* States. Bah! *that* has been broken, and so can this."

Clarence's face paled. But before he could speak there was a rapid clattering at the gate and a dismounted

vaquero entered excitedly. Turning to Mrs. Brant he said hurriedly, "Mother of God! the casa is surrounded by a rabble of mounted men, and there is one among them even now who demands admittance in the name of the Law."

"This is your work," said Brooks, facing Clarence furiously. "You have brought them with you, but, by God, they shall not save you!" He would have clutched Clarence, but the powerful arm of Judge Beeswinger intervened. Nevertheless, he still struggled to reach Clarence, appealing to the others: "Are you fools to stand there and let him triumph! Don't you see the cowardly Yankee trick he 's played upon us?"

"He has not," said Mrs. Brant haughtily. "I have no reason to love him or his friends; but I know he does not lie."

"Gentlemen! — gentlemen!" implored Colonel Starbottle with beaming and unctuous persuasion, "may I — er — remark — that all this is far from the question? Are we to be alarmed because an unknown rabble, no matter whence they come, demand entrance here in the name of the Law? I am not aware of any law of the State of California that we are infringing. By all means admit them."

The gate was thrown open. A single thick-set man, apparently unarmed and dressed like an ordinary traveler, followed by half a dozen other equally unpretentious-looking men, entered. The leader turned to the balcony.

"I am the Chief of Police of San Francisco. I have warrants for the arrest of Colonel Culpepper Starbottle, Joshua Brooks, Captain Pinckney, Clarence Brant and Alice his wife, and others charged with inciting to riot and unlawful practice calculated to disturb the peace of the State of California and its relations with the Federal government," said the leader, in a dry official voice.

Clarence started. In spite of its monotonous utterance

it was the voice of the red-bearded controversialist of the stagecoach. But where were his characteristic beard and hair? Involuntarily Clarence glanced at Judge Beeswinger; that gentleman was quietly regarding the stranger with an impassive face that betrayed no recognition whatever.

"But the city of San Francisco has no jurisdiction here," said Colonel Starbottle, turning a bland smile towards his fellow-members. "I am — er — sorry to inform you that you are simply trespassing, sir."

"I am here also as deputy sheriff," returned the stranger coolly. "We were unable to locate the precise place of this meeting, although we knew of its existence. I was sworn in this morning at Santa Inez by the judge of this district, and these gentlemen with me are my posse."

There was a quick movement of resistance by the members, which was, however, again waved blandly aside by Colonel Starbottle. Leaning forward in a slightly forensic attitude, with his fingers on the table and a shirt frill that seemed to have become of itself erectile, he said, with pained but polite precision, "I grieve to have to state, sir, that even that position is utterly untenable here. I am a lawyer myself, as my friend here, Judge Beeswinger — eh? I beg your pardon!"

The officer of the law had momentarily started, with his eyes fixed on Judge Beeswinger, who, however, seemed to be quietly writing at the table.

"As Judge Beeswinger," continued Colonel Starbottle, "will probably tell you; and as a jurist himself, he will also probably agree with me when I also inform you that, as the United States government is an aggrieved party, it is a matter for the Federal courts to prosecute, and that the only officer we can recognize is the United States Marshal for the district. When I add that the marshal, Colonel Crackenthorpe, is one of my oldest friends, and an active sympathizer with the South in the present struggle,

you will understand that any action from him in this matter is exceedingly improbable."

The general murmur of laughter, relief, and approval was broken by the quiet voice of Judge Beeswinger.

"Let me see your warrant, Mr. Deputy Sheriff."

The officer approached him with a slightly perplexed and constrained air, and exhibited the paper. Judge Beeswinger handed it back to him. "Colonel Starbottle is quite right in his contention," he said quietly; "the only officer that this assembly can recognize is the United States Marshal or his legal deputy. But Colonel Starbottle is wrong in his supposition that Colonel Crackenthorpe still retains the functions of that office. He was removed by the President of the United States, and his successor was appointed and sworn in by the Federal judge early this morning." He paused, and folding up the paper on which he had been writing, placed it in the hands of the deputy. "And this," he continued in the same even voice, "constitutes you his deputy, and will enable you to carry out your duty in coming here."

"What the devil does this mean, sir? Who are you?" gasped Colonel Starbottle, recoiling suddenly from the man at his side.

"I am the new United States Marshal for the Southern District of California."

CHAPTER III

Unsuspected and astounding as the revelation was to Clarence, its strange reception by the conspirators seemed to him as astounding. He had started forward, half expecting that the complacent and self-confessed spy would be immolated by his infuriated dupes. But to his surprise the shock seemed to have changed their natures, and given them the dignity they had lacked. The excitability, irritation, and recklessness which had previously characterized them had disappeared. The deputy and his posse, who had advanced to the assistance of their revealed chief, met with no resistance. They had evidently, as if with one accord, drawn away from Judge Beeswinger, leaving a cleared space around him, and regarded their captors with sullen contemptuous silence. It was only broken by Colonel Starbottle: —

"Your duty commands you, sir, to use all possible diligence in bringing us before the Federal judge of this district — unless your master in Washington has violated the Constitution so far as to remove him, too!"

"I understand you perfectly," returned Judge Beeswinger, with unchanged composure; "and as you know that Judge Wilson unfortunately cannot be removed except through a regular course of impeachment, I suppose you may still count upon his Southern sympathies to befriend you. With that I have nothing to do; my duty is complete when my deputy has brought you before him and I have stated the circumstances of the arrest."

"I congratulate you, sir," said Captain Pinckney, with

an ironical salute, "on your prompt reward for your treachery to the South, and your equally prompt adoption of the peculiar tactics of your friends in the way in which you have entered this house."

"I am sorry I cannot congratulate *you*, sir," returned Judge Beeswinger gravely, "on breaking your oath to the government which has educated and supported you and given you the epaulettes you disgrace. Nor shall I discuss 'treachery' with the man who has not only violated the trust of his country, but even the integrity of his friend's household. It is for that reason that I withhold the action of this warrant in so far as it affects the persons of the master and mistress of this home. I am satisfied that Mr. Brant has been as ignorant of what has been done here as I am that his wife has been only the foolish dupe of a double traitor!"

"Silence!"

The words broke simultaneously from the lips of Clarence and Captain Pinckney. They stood staring at each other — the one pale, the other crimson — as Mrs. Brant, apparently oblivious of the significance of their united adjuration, turned to Judge Beeswinger in the fury of her still stifled rage and mortification.

"Keep your mercy for your fellow-spy," she said, with a contemptuous gesture towards her husband; "*I* go with these gentlemen!"

"You will not," said Clarence quietly, "until I have said a word to you alone." He laid his hand firmly upon her wrist.

The deputy and his prisoners filed slowly out of the courtyard together, the latter courteously saluting Mrs. Brant as they passed, but turning from Judge Beeswinger in contemptuous silence. The judge followed them to the gate, but there he paused. Turning to Mrs. Brant, who was still half struggling in the strong grip of her husband, he said, —

"Any compunction I may have had in misleading you by accepting your invitation here I dismissed after I had entered this house. And I trust," he added, turning to Clarence sternly, "I leave you the master of it!"

As the gate closed behind him, Clarence locked it. When his wife turned upon him angrily, he said quietly, —

"I have no intention of restraining your liberty a moment after our interview is over, but until then I do not intend to be disturbed."

She threw herself disdainfully back in her chair, her hands clasped in her lap in half-contemptuous resignation, with her eyes upon her long slim arched feet crossed before her. Even in her attitude there was something of her old fascination which, however, now seemed to sting Clarence to the quick.

"I have nothing to say to you in regard to what has just passed in this house, except that as long as I remain even nominally its master it shall not be repeated. Although I shall no longer attempt to influence or control your political sympathies, I shall not allow you to indulge them where in any way they seem to imply my sanction. But so little do I oppose your liberty, that you are free to rejoin your political companions whenever you choose to do so on your own responsibility. But I must first know from your own lips whether your sympathies are purely political — or a name for something else?"

She had alternately flushed and paled, although still keeping her scornful attitude as he went on, but there was no mistaking the genuineness of her vague wonderment at his concluding words.

"I don't understand you," she said, lifting her eyes to his in a moment of cold curiosity. "What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? What did Judge Beeswinger mean when he called Captain Pinckney a double traitor?" he said roughly.

She sprang to her feet with flashing eyes. "And you — *you!* dare to repeat the cowardly lie of a confessed spy. This, then, is what you wished to tell me — this the insult for which you have kept me here; because you are incapable of understanding unselfish patriotism or devotion — even to your own cause — you dare to judge me by your own base, Yankee-trading standards. Yes, it is worthy of you!" She walked rapidly up and down, and then suddenly faced him. "I understand it all; I appreciate your magnanimity now. You are willing I should join the company of these chivalrous gentlemen in order to give color to your calumnies! Say at once that it was you who put up this spy to correspond with me — to come here — in order to entrap me. Yes! entrap me — I — who a moment ago stood up for you before these gentlemen, and said you could not lie. Bah!"

Struck only by the wild extravagance of her speech and temper, Clarence did not know that when women are most illogical they are apt to be most sincere, and from a man's standpoint her unreasoning deductions appeared to him only as an affectation to gain time for thought, or a theatrical display, like Susy's. And he was turning half contemptuously away, when she again faced him with flashing eyes.

"Well, hear me! I accept; I leave here at once to join my own people, my own friends — those who understand me — put what construction on it that you choose. Do your worst; you cannot do more to separate us than you have done just now."

She left him, and ran up the steps with a singular return of her old occasional nymph-like nimbleness — the movement of a woman who had never borne children — and a swish of her long skirts that he remembered for many a day after, as she disappeared in the corridor. He remained looking after her — indignant, outraged, and unconvinced. There was a rattling at the gate.

He remembered he had locked it. He opened it to the flushed pink cheeks and dancing eyes of Susy. The rain was still dripping from her wet cloak as she swung it from her shoulders.

"I know it all! — all that 's happened," she burst out with half-girlish exuberance and half the actress's declamation. "We met them all in the road — posse and prisoners. Chief Thompson knew me and told me all. And so you 've done it — and you 're master in your old house again. Clarence, old boy! Jim said you would n't do it — said you 'd weaken on account of her! But I said 'No.' I knew you better, old Clarence, and I saw it in your face, for all your stiffness! ha! But for all that I was mighty nervous and uneasy, and I just made Jim send an excuse to the theatre and we rushed it down here! Lordy! but it looks natural to see the old house again! And she — you packed her off with the others — did n't you? Tell me, Clarence," in her old appealing voice, "you shook her, too!"

Dazed and astounded, and yet experiencing a vague sense of relief with something like his old tenderness towards the willful woman before him, he had silently regarded her until her allusion to his wife recalled him to himself.

"Hush!" he said quickly, with a glance towards the corridor.

"Ah!" said Susy, with a malicious smile, "then that 's why Captain Pinckney was lingering in the rear with the deputy."

"Silence!" repeated Clarence sternly. "Go in there," pointing to the garden room below the balcony, "and wait there with your husband."

He half led, half pushed her into the room which had been his business office, and returned to the patio. A hesitating voice from the balcony said, "Clarence!"

It was his wife's voice, but modified and gentler — more like her voice as he had first heard it, or as if it had been chastened by some reminiscence of those days. It was his wife's face, too, that looked down on his — paler than he had seen it since he entered the house. She was shawled and hooded, carrying a traveling-bag in her hand.

"I am going, Clarence," she said, pausing before him, with gentle gravity, "but not in anger. I even ask you to forgive me for the foolish words that I think your still more foolish accusation" — she smiled faintly — "dragged from me. I am going because I know that I have brought — and that while I am here I shall always be bringing — upon you the imputation and even the responsibility of my own faith! While I am proud to own it, — and if needs be suffer for it, — I have no right to ruin your prospects, or even make you the victim of the slurs that others may cast upon me. Let us part as friends — separated only by our different political faiths, but keeping all other faiths together — until God shall settle the right of this struggle. Perhaps it may be soon — I sometimes think it may be years of agony for all; but until then, good-by."

She had slowly descended the steps to the patio, looking handsomer than he had ever seen her, and as if sustained and upheld by the enthusiasm of her cause. Her hand was outstretched towards his — his heart beat violently — in another moment he might have forgotten all and clasped her to his breast. Suddenly she stopped, her outstretched arm stiffened, her finger pointed to the chair on which Susy's cloak was hanging.

"What's that?" she said in a sharp, high, metallic voice. "Who is here? Speak!"

"Susy," said Clarence.

She cast a scathing glance round the patio, and then settled her piercing eyes on Clarence with a bitter smile.

"Already!"

Clarence felt the blood rush to his face as he stammered, "She knew what was happening here, and came to give you warning."

"Liar!"

"Stop!" said Clarence, with a white face. "She came to tell me that Captain Pinckney was still lingering for you in the road."

He threw open the gate to let her pass. As she swept out she lifted her hand. As he closed the gate there were the marks of her four fingers on his cheek.

CHAPTER IV

For once Susy had not exaggerated. Captain Pinckney *was* lingering, with the deputy who had charge of him, on the trail near the casa. It had already been pretty well understood by both captives and captors that the arrest was simply a legal demonstration; that the sympathizing Federal judge would undoubtedly order the discharge of the prisoners on their own recognizances, and it was probable that the deputy saw no harm in granting Pinckney's request — which was virtually only a delay in his liberation. It was also possible that Pinckney had worked upon the chivalrous sympathies of the man by professing his disinclination to leave their devoted colleague, Mrs. Brant, at the mercy of her antagonistic and cold-blooded husband at such a crisis, and it is to be feared also that Clarence, as a reputed lukewarm partisan, excited no personal sympathy, even from his own party. Howbeit, the deputy agreed to delay Pinckney's journey for a parting interview with his fair hostess.

How far this expressed the real sentiments of Captain Pinckney was never known. Whether his political association with Mrs. Brant had developed into a warmer solicitude, understood or ignored by her, — what were his hopes and aspirations regarding her future, — were by the course of fate never disclosed. A man of easy ethics, but rigid artificialities of honor, flattered and pampered by class prejudice, a so-called "man of the world," with no experience beyond his own limited circle, yet brave and devoted to that, it were well, perhaps, to leave this last act of his inefficient life as it was accepted by the deputy.

Dismounting, he approached the house from the garden. He was already familiar with the low arched doorway which led to the business room, and from which he could gain admittance to the patio, but it so chanced that he entered the dark passage at the moment that Clarence had thrust Susy into the business room, and heard its door shut sharply. For an instant he believed that Mrs. Brant had taken refuge there, but as he cautiously moved forward he heard her voice in the patio beyond. Its accents struck him as pleading; an intense curiosity drew him further along the passage. Suddenly her voice seemed to change to angry denunciation, and the word "Liar" rang upon his ears. It was followed by his own name uttered sardonically by Clarence, the swift rustle of a skirt, the clash of the gate, and then — forgetting everything, he burst into the patio.

Clarence was just turning from the gate with the marks of his wife's hand still red on his white cheek. He saw Captain Pinckney's eyes upon it, and the faint, half-malicious, half-hysteric smile upon his lips. But without a start or gesture of surprise he locked the gate, and, turning to him, said with frigid significance, —

"I thank you for returning so promptly, and for recognizing the only thing I now require at your hand."

But Captain Pinckney had recovered his supercilious ease with the significant demand.

"You seem to have had something already from another's hand, sir, but I am at your service," he said lightly.

"You will consider that I have accepted it from you," said Clarence, drawing closer to him with a rigid face. "I suppose it will not be necessary for me to return it — to make you understand me."

"Go on," said Pinckney, flushing slightly. "Make your terms; I am ready."

"But I 'm not," said the unexpected voice of the deputy

at the grille of the gateway. "Excuse my interfering, gentlemen, but this sort o' thing ain't down in my schedule. I 've let this gentleman," pointing to Captain Pinckney, "off for a minute to say 'good-by' to a lady, who I reckon has just ridden off in her buggy with her servant without saying by your leave, but I did n't calkelate to let him inter another business, which, like as not, may prevent me from delivering his body safe and sound into court. You hear me!" As Clarence opened the gate he added, "I don't want ter spoil sport between gents, but it 's got to come in after I 've done my duty."

"I 'll meet you, sir, anywhere, and with what weapons you choose," said Pinckney, turning angrily upon Clarence, "as soon as this farce — for which you and your friends are responsible — is over." He was furious at the intimation that Mrs. Brant had escaped him.

A different thought was in the husband's mind. "But what assurance have I that you are going on with the deputy?" he said with purposely insulting deliberation.

"My word, sir," said Captain Pinckney sharply.

"And if that ain't enuff, there 's mine!" said the deputy. "For if this gentleman swerves to the right or left betwixt this and Santa Inez, I 'll blow a hole through him myself. And that," he added deprecatingly, "is saying a good deal for a man who does n't want to spoil sport, and for the matter of that is willing to stand by and see fair play done at Santa Inez any time to-morrow before breakfast."

"Then I can count on you," said Clarence, with a sudden impulse extending his hand.

The man hesitated a moment and then grasped it.

"Well, I was n't expecting that," he said slowly; "but you look as if you meant business, and if you ain't got anybody else to see you through, I 'm thar! I suppose this gentleman will have his friends."

"I shall be there at six with my seconds," said Pinckney curtly. "Lead on."

The gate closed behind them. Clarence stood looking around the empty patio and the silent house, from which it was now plain that the servants had been withdrawn to insure the secrecy of the conspiracy. Cool and collected as he knew he was, he remained for a moment in hesitation. Then the sound of voices came to his ear from the garden room, the light frivolity of Susy's laugh and Hooker's huskier accents. He had forgotten they were there — he had forgotten their existence!

Trusting still to his calmness, he called to Hooker in his usual voice. That gentleman appeared with a face which his attempts to make unconcerned and impassive had, however, only deepened into funereal gravity.

"I have something to attend to," said Clarence, with a faint smile, "and I must ask you and Susy to excuse me for a little while. She knows the house perfectly, and will call the servants from the annex to provide you both with refreshment until I join you a little later." Satisfied from Hooker's manner that they knew nothing of his later interview with Pinckney, he turned away and ascended to his own room.

There he threw himself into an armchair by the dim light of a single candle as if to reflect. But he was conscious, even then, of his own calmness and want of excitement, and that no reflection was necessary. What he had done and what he intended to do was quite clear; there was no alternative suggested or to be even sought after. He had that sense of relief which comes with the climax of all great struggles, even of defeat.

He had never known before how hopeless and continuous had been that struggle until now it was over. He had no fear of to-morrow; he would meet it as he had to-day, with the same singular consciousness of being equal to the

occasion. There was even no necessity of preparation for it; his will, leaving his fortune to his wife, — which seemed a slight thing now in this greater separation, — was already in his safe in San Francisco; his pistols were in the next room. He was even slightly disturbed by his own insensibility, and passed into his wife's bed-room partly in the hope of disturbing his serenity by some memento of their past. There was no disorder of flight — everything was in its place, except the drawer of her desk, which was still open, as if she had taken something from it as an afterthought. There were letters and papers there, some of his own and some in Captain Pinckney's handwriting. It did not occur to him to look at them — even to justify himself, or excuse her. He knew that his hatred of Captain Pinckney was not so much that he believed him her lover, as his sudden conviction that she was like him! He was the male of her species — a being antagonistic to himself, whom he could fight, and crush, and revenge himself upon. But most of all he loathed his past, not on account of her, but of his own weakness that had made him her dupe and a misunderstood man to his friends. He had been derelict of duty in his unselfish devotion to her; he had stifled his ambition, and underrated his own possibilities. No wonder that others had accepted him at his own valuation. Clarence Brant was a modest man, but the egotism of modesty is more fatal than that of pretension, for it has the haunting consciousness of superior virtue.

He reëntered his own room and again threw himself into his chair. His calm was being succeeded by a physical weariness; he remembered he had not slept the night before, and he ought to take some rest to be fresh in the early morning. Yet he must also show himself before his self-invited guests, — Susy and her husband, — or their suspicions would be aroused. He would try to sleep for

a little while in the chair before he went downstairs again. He closed his eyes oddly enough on a dim dreamy recollection of Susy in the old days, in the little madroño hollow where she had once given him a rendezvous. He forgot the maturer and critical uneasiness with which he had then received her coquettish and willful advances, which he now knew was the effect of the growing dominance of Mrs. Peyton over him, and remembered only her bright, youthful eyes, and the kisses he had pressed upon her soft fragrant cheek. The faintness he had felt when waiting in the old rose garden, a few hours ago, seemed to steal on him once more, and to lapse into a pleasant drowsiness. He even seemed again to inhale the perfume of the roses.

"Clarence!"

He started. He had been sleeping, but the voice sounded strangely real.

A light, girlish laugh followed. He sprang to his feet. It was Susy standing beside him — and Susy even as she looked in the old days!

For with a flash of her old audacity, aided by her familiar knowledge of the house and the bunch of household keys she had found, which dangled from her girdle, as in the old fashion, she had disinterred one of her old frocks from a closet, slipped it on, and loosening her brown hair had let it fall in rippling waves down her back. It was Susy in her old girlishness, with the instinct of the grown actress in the arrangement of her short skirt over her pretty ankles and the half-conscious pose she had taken.

"Poor dear old Clarence," she said, with dancing eyes; "I might have won a dozen pairs of gloves from you while you slept there. But you 're tired, dear old boy, and you 've had a hard time of it. No matter; you 've shown yourself a man at last, and I 'm proud of you."

Half ashamed of the pleasure he felt even in his embar-

rassment, Clarence stammered, "But this change — this dress."

Susy clapped her hands like a child. "I knew it would surprise you! It 's an old frock I wore the year I went away with auntie. I knew where it was hidden, and fished it out again with these keys, Clarence; it seemed so like old times. Lord! when I was with the old servants again, and you did n't come down, I just felt as if I 'd never been away, and I just rampaged free. It seemed to me, don't you know, not as if I 'd just come, but as if I 'd always been right here, and it was you who 'd just come. Don't you understand! Just as you came when me and Mary Rogers were here; don't you remember her, Clarence, and how she used to do 'gooseberry' for us? Well, just like that. So I said to Jim, 'I don't know you any more — get!' and I just slipped on this frock and ordered Manuela around as I used to do — and she in fits of laughter; I reckon, Clarence, she has n't laughed as much since I left. And then I thought of you — perhaps worried and flustered as yet over things, and the change, and I just slipped into the kitchen and I told old fat Conchita to make some of these tortillas you know, — with sugar and cinnamon sprinkled on top, — and I tied on an apron and brought 'em up to you on a tray with a glass of that old Catalan wine you used to like. Then I sorter felt frightened when I got here, and I did n't hear any noise, and I put the tray down in the hall and peeped in and found you asleep. Sit still, I 'll fetch 'em."

She tripped out into the passage, returning with the tray, which she put on the table beside Clarence, and then, standing back a little and with her hands tucked soubrette fashion in the tiny pockets of her apron, gazed at him with a mischievous smile.

It was impossible not to smile back as he nibbled the crisp Mexican cake and drank the old mission wine. And Susy's tongue trilled an accompaniment to his thanks.

"Lord! it seems so nice to be here — just you and me, Clarence — like in the old days — with nobody naggin' and swoopin' round after you. Don't be greedy, Clarence, but give me a cake." She took one and finished the dregs of his glass.

Then sitting on the arm of his chair, she darted a violet ray of half reproach and half mischievousness into his amused and retrospective eyes. "There used to be room for two in that chair, Klarns."

The use of the old childish diminutive for his name seemed to him natural as her familiarity, and he moved a little sideways to make room for her with an instinct of pleasure, but the same sense of irresponsibility that had characterized his reflections. Nevertheless, he looked critically into the mischievous eyes, and said quietly, —

"Where is your husband?"

There was no trace of embarrassment, apology, or even of consciousness in her pretty face as she replied, passing her hand lightly through his hair, —

"Oh, Jim? I 've packed him off!"

"Packed him off!" echoed Clarence, slightly astonished.

"Yes, to Fair Plains, full tilt after your wife's buggy. You see, Clarence, after the old cat — that 's your wife, please — left, I wanted to make sure she had gone, and was n't hangin' round to lead you off again with your leg tied to her apron string like a chicken's! No! I said to Jim, 'Just you ride after her until you see she 's safe and sound in the down coach from Fair Plains without her knowin' it, and if she 's inclined to hang back or wobble any, you post back here and let me know!' I told him I would stay and look after you to see you did n't bolt too!" She laughed, and then added, "But I did n't think I should fall into the old ways so soon, and have such a nice time. Did you, Clarence?"

She looked so irresponsible, sitting there with her face

near his, and so childishly, or perhaps thoughtlessly, happy, that he could only admire her levity, and even the slight shock that her flippant allusion to his wife had given him seemed to him only a weakness of his own. After all, was not hers the true philosophy? Why should not these bright eyes see things more clearly than his own? Nevertheless, with his eyes still fixed upon them, he continued, —

"And Jim was willing to go?"

She stopped, with her fingers still lifting a lock of his hair. "Why, yes, you silly — why should n't he? I 'd like to see him refuse. Why, Lord! Jim will do anything I ask him." She put down the lock of hair, and suddenly looking full into his eyes, said, "That 's just the difference between him and me, and you and — that woman!"

"Then you love him!"

"About as much as you love her," she said, with an unaffected laugh; "only he don't wind me around his finger."

No doubt she was right for all her thoughtlessness, and yet he was going to fight about that woman to-morrow! No — he forgot; he was going to fight Captain Pinckney because he was like her!

Susy had put her finger on the crease between his brows which this supposition had made, and tried to rub it out.

"You know it as well as I do, Clarence," she said, with a pretty wrinkling of her own brows, which was her nearest approach to thoughtfulness. "You know you never really liked her, only you thought her ways were grander and more proper than mine, and you know you were always a little bit of a snob and a prig too — dear boy. And Mrs. Peyton was — bless my soul! — a Benham and a planter's daughter, and I — I was only a picked-up orphan! That 's where Jim is better than you — now sit

still, goosey! — even if I don't like him as much. Oh, I know what you're always thinking; you're thinking we're both exaggerated and theatrical, ain't you? But don't you think it's a heap better to be exaggerated and theatrical about things that are just sentimental and romantic than to be so awfully possessed and overcome about things that are only real? There, you needn't stare at me so! It's true. You've had your fill of grandeur and propriety, and — here you are. And," she added with a little chuckle, as she tucked up her feet and leaned a little closer to him, "here's *me.*"

He did not speak, but his arm quite unconsciously passed round her small waist.

"You see, Clarence," she went on with equal unconsciousness of the act, "you ought never to have let me go — never! You ought to have kept me here — or run away with me. And you oughtn't to have tried to make me proper. And you oughtn't to have driven me to flirt with that horrid Spaniard, and you oughtn't to have been so horribly cold and severe when I did. And you oughtn't to have made me take up with Jim, who was the only one who thought me his equal. I might have been very silly and capricious; I might have been very vain, but my vanity isn't a bit worse than your pride; my love of praise and applause in the theatre isn't a bit more horrid than your fears of what people might think of you or me. That's gospel truth, isn't it, Clarence? Tell me! Don't look that way and this — look at *me!* I ain't poisonous, Clarence. Why, one of your cheeks is redder than the other, Clarence; that's the one that's turned from me. Come," she went on, taking the lapels of his coat between her hands and half shaking him, half drawing him nearer her bright face. "Tell me — isn't it true?"

"I was thinking of you just now when I fell asleep, Susy," he said. He did not know why he said it; he

had not intended to tell her, he had only meant to avoid a direct answer to her question; yet even now he went on. "And I thought of you when I was out there in the rose garden waiting to come in here."

"You did?" she said, drawing in her breath. A wave of delicate pink color came up to her very eyes, it seemed to him as quickly and as innocently as when she was a girl. "And what *did* you think, Klarns," she half whispered — "tell me."

He did not speak, but answered her blue eyes and then her lips, as her arms slipped quite naturally around his neck.

. . . . . .

The dawn was breaking as Clarence and Jim Hooker emerged together from the gate of the casa. Mr. Hooker looked sleepy. He had found, after his return from Fair Plains, that his host had an early engagement at Santa Inez, and he had insisted upon rising to see him off. It was with difficulty, indeed, that Clarence could prevent his accompanying him. Clarence had not revealed to Susy the night before the real object of his journey, nor did Hooker evidently suspect it, yet when the former had mounted his horse, he hesitated for an instant, extending his hand.

"If I should happen to be detained," he began with a half smile.

But Jim was struggling with a yawn. "That 's all right — don't mind us," he said, stretching his arms. Clarence's hesitating hand dropped to his side, and with a light reckless laugh and a half sense of providential relief he galloped away.

What happened immediately thereafter during his solitary ride to Santa Inez, looking back upon it in after years, seemed but a confused recollection, more like a dream. The long stretches of vague distance, gradually opening

clearer with the rising sun in an unclouded sky; the meeting with a few early or belated travelers and his unconscious avoidance of them, as if they might know of his object; the black shadows of foreshortened cattle rising before him on the plain and arousing the same uneasy sensation of their being waylaying men; the wondering recognition of houses and landmarks he had long been familiar with; his purposeless attempts to recall the circumstances in which he had known them — all these were like a dream. So, too, were the recollections of the night before, the episode with Susy, already mingled and blended with the memory of their previous past; his futile attempts to look forward to the future, always, however, abandoned with relief at the thought that the next few hours might make them unnecessary. So also was the sudden realization that Santa Inez was before him, when he had thought he was not yet half way there, and as he dismounted before the Court House his singular feeling — followed, however, by no fear or distress — was that he had come so early to the rendezvous that he was not yet quite prepared for it.

This same sense of unreality pervaded his meeting with the deputy sheriff, at the news that the Federal judge had, as was expected, dismissed the prisoners on their own recognizances, and that Captain Pinckney was at the hotel at breakfast. In the like abstracted manner he replied to the one or two questions of the deputy, exhibited the pistols he had brought with him, and finally accompanied him to a little meadow hidden by trees, below the hotel, where the other principal and his seconds were awaiting them. And here he awoke — clear-eyed, keen, forceful, and intense!

So stimulated were his faculties that his sense of hearing in its acuteness took in every word of the conversation between the seconds, a few paces distant. He heard his

adversary's seconds say carelessly to the deputy sheriff, "I presume this is a case where there will be no apology or mediation," and the deputy's reply, "I reckon my man means business, but he seems a little queer." He heard the other second laugh, and say lightly, "They 're apt to be so when it 's their first time out," followed by the more anxious aside of the other second as the deputy turned away, — "Yes, but by G—d I don't like his looks!" His sense of sight was also so acute that having lost the choice of position, when the coin was tossed, and being turned with his face to the sun, even through the glare he saw, with unerring distinctness of outline, the black-coated figure of his opponent moved into range — saw the perfect outline of his features, and how the easy, supercilious smile, as he threw away his cigar, appeared to drop out of his face with a kind of vacant awe as he faced him. He felt his nerves become as steel as the counting began, and at the word "three," knew he had fired by the recoil of the pistol in his leveled hand, simultaneously with its utterance. And at the same moment, still standing like a rock, he saw his adversary miserably collapse, his legs grotesquely curving inwards under him, — without even the dignity of death in his fall, — and so sink helplessly like a felled bull to the ground. Still erect, and lowering only the muzzle of his pistol, as a thin feather of smoke curled up its shining side, he saw the doctor and seconds run quickly to the heap, try to lift its limp impotence into shape, and let it drop again with the words, "Right through the forehead, by G—d!"

"You 've done for him," said the deputy, turning to Clarence with a singular look of curiosity, "and I reckon you had better get out of this mighty quick. They did n't expect it; they 're just ragin'; they may round on you — and" — he added, more slowly, "they seem to have just found out who you are."

Even while he was speaking, Clarence, with his quickened ear, heard the words, "One of Hamilton Brant's pups." "Just like his father," from the group around the dead man. He did not hesitate, but walked coolly towards them. Yet a certain fierce pride — which he had never known before — stirred in his veins as their voices hushed and they half recoiled before him.

"Am I to understand from my second, gentlemen," he said, looking round the group, "that you are not satisfied?"

"The fight was square enough," said Pinckney's second in some embarrassment, "but I reckon that he," pointing to the dead man, "did not know who you were."

"Do you mean that he did not know that I was the son of a man proficient in the use of arms?"

"I reckon that 's about it," returned the second, glancing at the others.

"I am glad to say, sir, that I have a better opinion of his courage," said Clarence, lifting his hat to the dead body as he turned away.

Yet he was conscious of no remorse, concern, or even pity in his act. Perhaps this was visible in his face, for the group appeared awed by this perfection of the duelist's coolness, and even returned his formal parting salutation with a vague and timid respect. He thanked the deputy, regained the hotel, saddled his horse and galloped away.

But not towards the Rancho. Now that he could think of his future, that had no place in his reflections; even the episode of Susy was forgotten in the new and strange conception of himself and his irresponsibility which had come upon him with the killing of Pinckney and the words of his second. It was his dead father who had stiffened his arm and directed the fatal shot! It was hereditary influences — which others had been so quick to recognize — that had brought about this completing climax

of his trouble. How else could he account for it that he — a conscientious, peaceful, sensitive man, tender and forgiving as he had believed himself to be — could now feel so little sorrow or compunction for his culminating act? He had read of successful duelists who were haunted by remorse for their first victim; who retained a terrible consciousness of the appearance of the dead man; he had no such feeling; he had only a grim contentment in the wiped-out inefficient life, and contempt for the limp and helpless body. He suddenly recalled his callousness as a boy when face to face with the victims of the Indian massacre, his sense of fastidious superciliousness in the discovery of the body of Susy's mother! — surely it was the cold blood of his father influencing him ever thus. What had he to do with affection, with domestic happiness, with the ordinary ambitions of man's life — whose blood was frozen at its source! Yet even with this very thought came once more the old inconsistent tenderness he had as a boy lavished upon the almost unknown and fugitive father who had forsaken his childish companionship, and remembered him only by secret gifts. He remembered how he had worshiped him even while the pious padres at San José were endeavoring to eliminate this terrible poison from his blood and combat his hereditary instinct in his conflicts with his school-fellows. And it was a part of this inconsistency that, riding away from the scene of his first bloodshed, his eyes were dimmed with moisture, not for his victim, but for the one being who he believed had impelled him to the act.

This and more was in his mind during his long ride to Fair Plains, his journey by coach to the Embarcadero, his midnight passage across the dark waters of the bay, and his reëntrance to San Francisco, but what should be his future was still unsettled.

As he wound round the crest of Russian Hill and looked

down again upon the awakened city, he was startled to see that it was fluttering and streaming with bunting. From every public building and hotel, from the roofs of private houses, and even the windows of lonely dwellings, flapped and waved the striped and starry banner. The steady breath of the sea carried it out from masts and yards of ships at their wharves, from the battlements of the forts Alcatraz and Yerba Bueno. He remembered that the ferryman had told him that the news from Fort Sumter had swept the city with a revulsion of patriotic sentiment, and that there was no doubt that the State was saved to the Union. He looked down upon it with haggard, bewildered eyes, and then a strange gasp and fullness of the throat! For afar a solitary bugle had blown the "reveille" at Fort Alcatraz.

PART II

CHAPTER I

NIGHT at last, and the stir and tumult of a great fight over. Even the excitement that had swept this portion of the battlefield — only a small section of a vaster area of struggle — into which a brigade had marched, held its own, been beaten back, recovered its ground, and, pursuing, had passed out of it forever, leaving only its dead behind, and knowing nothing more of that struggle than its own impact and momentum — even this wild excitement had long since evaporated with the stinging smoke of gunpowder, the acrid smell of burning rags from the clothing of a dead soldier fired by a bursting shell, or the heated reek of sweat and leather. A cool breath that seemed to bring back once more the odor of the upturned earthworks along the now dumb line of battle began to move from the suggestive darkness beyond.

But into that awful penetralia of death and silence there was no invasion — there had been no retreat. A few of the wounded had been brought out, under fire, but the others had been left with the dead for the morning light and succor. For it was known that in that horrible obscurity, riderless horses, frantic with the smell of blood, galloped wildly here and there, or, maddened by wounds, plunged furiously at the intruder; that the wounded soldier, still armed, could not always distinguish friend from foe or from the ghouls of camp followers who stripped the dead in the darkness and struggled with the dying. A

shot or two heard somewhere in that obscurity counted as nothing with the long fusillade that had swept it in the daytime; the passing of a single life, more or less, amounted to little in the long roll-call of the day's slaughter.

But with the first beams of the morning sun — and the slowly moving "relief detail" from the camp — came a weird half-resurrection of that ghastly field. Then it was that the long rays of sunlight, streaming away a mile beyond the battle line, pointed out the first harvest of the dead where the reserves had been posted. There they lay in heaps and piles, killed by solid shot or bursting shells that had leaped the battle line to plunge into the waiting ranks beyond. As the sun lifted higher its beams fell within the range of musketry fire, where the dead lay thicker, — even as they had fallen when killed outright, — with arms extended and feet at all angles to the field. As it touched these dead upturned faces, strangely enough it brought out no expression of pain or anguish — but rather as if death had arrested them only in surprise and awe. It revealed on the lips of those who had been mortally wounded and had turned upon their side the relief which death had brought their suffering, sometimes shown in a faint smile. Mounting higher, it glanced upon the actual battle line, curiously curving for the shelter of walls, fences, and breastworks, and here the dead lay, even as when they lay and fired, their faces prone in the grass but their muskets still resting across the breastworks. Exposed to grape and canister from the battery on the ridge, death had come to them mercifully also — through the head and throat. And now the whole field lay bare in the sunlight, broken with grotesque shadows cast from sitting, crouching, half-recumbent but always rigid figures, which might have been effigies on their own monuments. One half-kneeling soldier, with head bowed between his stiffened hands, might have stood for a carven figure of Grief at the

feet of his dead comrade. A captain, shot through the brain in the act of mounting a wall, lay sideways half across it, his lips parted with a word of command; his sword still pointing over the barrier the way that they should go.

But it was not until the sun had mounted higher that it struck the central horror of the field and seemed to linger there in dazzling persistence, now and then returning to it in startling flashes that it might be seen of men and those who brought succor. A tiny brook had run obliquely near the battle line. It was here that, the night before the battle, friend and foe had filled their canteens side by side with soldierly recklessness — or perhaps a higher instinct — purposely ignoring each other's presence; it was here that the wounded had afterwards crept, crawled, and dragged themselves; here they had pushed, wrangled, striven, and fought for a draught of that precious fluid which assuaged the thirst of their wounds — or happily put them out of their misery forever; here overborne, crushed, suffocated by numbers, pouring their own blood into the flood, and tumbling after it with their helpless bodies, they dammed the stream, until recoiling, red and angry, it had burst its banks and overflowed the cotton-field in a broad pool that now sparkled in the sunlight. But below this human dam — a mile away — where the brook still crept sluggishly, the ambulance horses sniffed and started from it.

The detail moved on slowly, doing their work expeditiously, and apparently callously, but really only with that mechanical movement that saves emotion. Only once they were moved to an outbreak of indignation, — the discovery of the body of an officer whose pockets were turned inside out, but whose hand was still tightly grasped on his buttoned waistcoat, as if resisting the outrage that had been done while still in life. As the men disengaged the stiffened hand something slipped from the waistcoat to the

ground. The corporal picked it up and handed it to his officer. It was a sealed packet. The officer received it with the carelessness which long experience of these pathetic missives from the dying to their living relations had induced, and dropped it in the pocket of his tunic, with the half-dozen others that he had picked up that morning, and moved on with the detail. A little further on they halted, in the attitude of attention, as a mounted officer appeared, riding slowly down the line.

There was something more than the habitual respect of their superior in their faces as he came forward. For it was the general who had commanded the brigade the day before, — the man who had leaped with one bound into the foremost rank of military leaders. It was his invincible spirit that had led the advance, held back defeat against overwhelming numbers, sustained the rally, impressed his subordinate officers with his own undeviating purpose, and even infused them with an almost superstitious belief in his destiny of success. It was this man who had done what it was deemed impossible to do, — what even at the time it was thought unwise and unstrategic to do, — who had held a weak position, of apparently no importance, under the mandate of an incomprehensible order from his superior, which at best asked only for a sacrifice and was rewarded with a victory. He had decimated his brigade, but the wounded and dying had cheered him as he passed, and the survivors had pursued the enemy until the bugle called them back. For such a record he looked still too young and scholarly, albeit his handsome face was dark and energetic, and his manner taciturn.

His quick eye had already caught sight of the rifled body of the officer, and contracted. As the captain of the detail saluted him he said curtly, —

"I thought the orders were to fire upon any one desecrating the dead?"

"They are, General; but the hyenas don't give us a chance. That 's all yonder poor fellow saved from their claws," replied the officer, as he held up the sealed packet. "It has no address."

The general took it, examined the envelope, thrust it into his belt, and said, —

"I will take charge of it."

The sound of horses' hoofs came from the rocky roadside beyond the brook. Both men turned. A number of field officers were approaching.

"The division staff," said the captain, in a lower voice, falling back.

They came slowly forward, a central figure on a gray horse leading here — as in history. A short, thick-set man with a grizzled beard closely cropped around an inscrutable mouth, and the serious formality of a respectable country deacon in his aspect, which even the major-general's blazon on the shoulder-strap of his loose tunic on his soldierly seat in the saddle could not entirely obliterate. He had evidently perceived the general of brigade, and quickened his horse as the latter drew up. The staff followed more leisurely, but still with some curiosity, to witness the meeting of the first general of the army with the youngest. The division general saluted, but almost instantly withdrew his leathern gauntlet, and offered his bared hand to the brigadier. The words of heroes are scant. The drawn-up detail, the waiting staff listened. This was all they heard: —

"Halleck tells me you 're from California?"

"Yes, General."

"Ah! I lived there, too, in the early days. Wonderful country. Developed greatly since my time, I suppose?"

"Yes, General."

"Great resources; finest wheat-growing country in the world, sir. You don't happen to know what the actual crop was this year?"

"Hardly, General! but something enormous."

"Yes, I have always said it would be. Have a cigar?"

He handed his cigar-case to the brigadier. Then he took one himself, lighted it at the smouldering end of the one he had taken from his mouth, was about to throw the stump carelessly down, but, suddenly recollecting himself, leaned over his horse, and dropped it carefully a few inches away from the face of a dead soldier. Then, straightening himself in the saddle, he shoved his horse against the brigadier, moving him a little further on, while a slight movement of his hand kept the staff from following.

"A heavy loss here!"

"I 'm afraid so, General."

"It could n't be helped. We had to rush in your brigade to gain time, and occupy the enemy, until we could change front."

The young general looked at the shrewd, cold eyes of his chief.

"Change front?" he echoed.

"Yes. Before a gun was fired, we discovered that the enemy was in complete possession of all our plans, and knew every detail of our forward movement. All had to be changed."

The younger man now instantly understood the incomprehensible order of the day before.

The general of division continued, with his first touch of official formality, —

"You understand, therefore, General Brant, that in the face of this extraordinary treachery, the utmost vigilance is required, and a complete surveillance of your camp followers and civilians, to detect the actual spy within our lines, or the traitor we are harboring, who has become possessed of this information. You will overhaul your brigade, and weed out all suspects, and in the position which you are to take to-morrow, and the plantation you

will occupy, you will see that your private quarters, as well as your lines, are cleared of all but those you can vouch for."

He reined in his horse, again extended his hand, saluted, and rejoined his staff.

Brigadier-General Clarence Brant remained for a moment with his head bent in thoughtful contemplation of the coolness of his veteran chief under this exciting disclosure, and the strategy with which he had frustrated the traitor's success. Then his eye caught the sealed packet in his belt. He mechanically drew it out, and broke the seal. The envelope was filled with papers and memorandums. But as he looked at them his face darkened and his brow knit. He glanced quickly around him. The staff had trotted away; the captain and his detail were continuing their work at a little distance. He took a long breath, for he was holding in his hand a tracing of their camp, even of the position he was to occupy to-morrow, and a detailed account of the movements, plans, and force of the whole division as had been arranged in council of war the day before the battle! But there was no indication of the writer or his intentions.

He thrust the papers hurriedly back into the envelope, but placed it, this time, in his breast. He galloped towards the captain.

"Let me see again the officer from whom you took that packet!"

The captain led him to where the body lay, with others, extended more decently on the grass awaiting removal. General Brant with difficulty repressed an ejaculation.

"Why, it 's one of our own men," he said quickly.

"Yes, General. They say it 's Lieutenant Wainwright, a regular, of the paymaster-general's department."

"Then what was he doing here?" asked General Brant sternly.

"I can't make out, sir, unless he went into the last advance as a volunteer. Wanted to see the fight, I suppose. He was a dashing fellow, a West Pointer, — and a Southerner, too, — a Virginian."

"A Southerner!" echoed Brant quickly.

"Yes, sir."

"Search him again," said Brant quietly. He had recovered his usual coolness, and as the captain again examined the body, he took out his tablets and wrote a few lines. It was an order to search the quarters of Lieutenant Wainwright and bring all papers, letters, and documents to him. He then beckoned one of the detail towards him. "Take that to the provost marshal at once. Well, Captain," he added calmly, as the officer again approached him, "what do you find?"

"Only this, sir," returned the captain, with a half smile, producing a small photograph. "I suppose it was overlooked, too."

He handed it to Brant.

There was a sudden fixing of his commanding officer's eyes, but his face did not otherwise change.

"It's the usual find, General. Always a photograph! But this time a handsome woman!"

"Very," said Clarence Brant quietly. It was the portrait of his own wife.

CHAPTER II

Nevertheless, so complete was his control of voice and manner that, as he rode on to his quarters, no one would have dreamed that General Brant had just looked upon the likeness of the wife from whom he had parted in anger four years ago. Still less would they have suspected the strange fear that came upon him that in some way she was connected with the treachery he had just discovered. He had heard from her only once, and then through her late husband's lawyer, in regard to her Californian property, and believed that she had gone to her relations in Alabama, where she had identified herself with the Southern cause, even to the sacrifice of her private fortune. He had heard her name mentioned in the Southern press as a fascinating society leader, and even coadjutrix of Southern politicians, but he had no reason to believe that she had taken so active or so desperate a part in the struggle. He tried to think that his uneasiness sprang from his recollection of the previous treachery of Captain Pinckney, and the part that she had played in the Californian conspiracy, although he had long since acquitted her of the betrayal of any nearer trust. But there was a fateful similarity in the two cases. There was no doubt that this Lieutenant Wainwright was a traitor in the camp, — that he had succumbed to the usual sophistry of his class in regard to his superior allegiance to his native State. But was there the inducement of another emotion, or was the photograph only the souvenir of a fascinating priestess of rebellion, whom the dead man had met? There was perhaps less of feeling

than scorn in the first suggestion, but he was nevertheless relieved when the provost marshal found no other incriminating papers in Wainwright's effects. Nor did he reveal to the division general the finding of the photograph. It was sufficient to disclose the work of the traitor without adding what might be a clue to his wife's participation in it, near or remote. There was risk enough in the former course, which his duty made imperative. He hardly dared to think of the past day's slaughter, which — there was no doubt now — had been due to the previous work of the spy, and how his brigade had been selected, by the irony of Fate, to suffer for and yet retrieve it. If she had had a hand in this wicked plot, ought he to spare her? Or was his destiny and hers to be thus monstrously linked together?

Luckily, however, the expiation of the chief offender and the timely discovery of his papers enabled the division commander to keep the affair discreetly silent, and to enjoin equal secrecy on the part of Brant. The latter, however, did not relax his vigilance, and after the advance the next day he made a minute inspection of the ground he was to occupy, its approaches and connections with the outlying country, and the rebel lines; increased the stringency of picket and sentry regulations, and exercised a rigid surveillance of noncombatants and civilians within the lines, even to the lowest canteener or camp follower. Then he turned his attention to the house he was to occupy as his headquarters.

It was a fine specimen of the old colonial planter's house, with its broad veranda, its great detached offices and negro quarters, and had, thus far, escaped the ravages and billeting of the war. It had been occupied by its owner up to a few days before the engagement, and so great had been the confidence of the enemy in their success that it had been used as the Confederate headquarters on the

morning of the decisive battle. Jasmine and rose, unstained by the sulphur of gunpowder, twined around its ruined columns and half hid the recessed windows; the careless flower garden was still in its unkempt and unplucked luxuriance; the courtyard before the stables alone showed marks of the late military occupancy, and was pulverized by the uneasy horsehoofs of the waiting staff. But the mingled impress of barbaric prodigality with patriarchal simplicity was still there in the domestic arrangements of a race who lived on half equal familiarity with strangers and their own servants.

The negro servants still remained, with a certain catlike fidelity to the place, and adapted themselves to the Northern invaders with a childlike enjoyment of the novelty of change. Brant, nevertheless, looked them over with an experienced eye, and satisfied himself of their trustworthiness; there were the usual number of "boys," gray-haired and grizzled in body service, and the "mammys" and "aunties" of the kitchen. There were two or three rooms in the wing which still contained private articles, pictures and souvenirs of the family, and a "young lady's" boudoir, which Brant, with characteristic delicacy, kept carefully isolated and intact from his military household, and accessible only to the family servants. The room he had selected for himself was nearest it, — a small, plainly furnished apartment, with an almost conventual simplicity in its cold, white walls and draperies, and the narrow, nun-like bed. It struck him that it might have belonged to some prim elder daughter or maiden aunt, who had acted as housekeeper, as it commanded the wing and servants' offices, with easy access to the central hall.

There followed a week of inactivity in which Brant felt a singular resemblance in this Southern mansion to the old casa at Robles. The afternoon shadows of the deep verandas recalled the old monastic gloom of the Spanish house,

which even the presence of a lounging officer or waiting orderly could not entirely dissipate, and the scent of the rose and jasmine from his windows overcame him with sad memories. He began to chafe under this inaction, and long again for the excitement of the march and bivouac, in which, for the past four years, he had buried his past.

He was sitting one afternoon alone before his reports and dispatches, when this influence seemed so strong that he half impulsively laid them aside to indulge in a long reverie. He was recalling his last day at Robles, the early morning duel with Pinckney, the return to San Francisco, and the sudden resolution which sent him that day across the continent to offer his services to the Government. He remembered his delay in the Western town, where a volunteer regiment was being recruited, his entrance into it as a private, his rapid selection, through the force of his sheer devotion and intelligent concentration, to the captaincy of his company; his swift promotion on hard-fought fields to the head of the regiment, and the singular success that had followed his resistless energy, which left him no time to think of anything but his duty. The sudden intrusion of his wife upon his career now, even in this accidental and perhaps innocent way, had seriously unsettled him.

The shadows were growing heavier and deeper, it lacked only a few moments of the sunset bugle, when he was recalled to himself by that singular instinctive consciousness, common to humanity, of being intently looked at. He turned quickly, — the door behind him closed softly. He rose and slipped into the hall. The tall figure of a woman was going down the passage. She was erect and graceful; but, as she turned towards the door leading to the offices, he distinctly saw the gaudily turbaned head and black silhouette of a negress. Nevertheless, he halted a moment at the door of the next room.

"See who that woman is who has just passed, Mr. Martin. She does n't seem to belong to the house."

The young officer rose, put on his cap, and departed. In a few moments he returned.

"Was she tall, sir, of a good figure, and very straight?"

"Yes."

"She is a servant of our neighbors, the Manlys, who occasionally visits the servants here; a mulatto, I think."

Brant reflected. Many of the mulattoes and negresses were of good figure, and the habit of carrying burdens on their heads gave them a singularly erect carriage.

The lieutenant looked at his chief.

"Have you any orders to give concerning her, General?"

"No," said Brant, after a moment's pause, and turned away.

The officer smiled. It seemed a good story to tell at mess of this human weakness of his handsome, reserved, and ascetic-looking leader.

A few mornings afterwards Brant was interrupted over his reports by the almost abrupt entrance of the officer of the day. His face was flushed, and it was evident that only the presence of his superior restrained his excitement. He held a paper in his hand.

"A lady presents this order and pass from Washington, countersigned by the division general."

"A lady?"

"Yes, sir, she is dressed as such. But she has not only declined the most ordinary civilities and courtesies we have offered her, but she has insulted Mr. Martin and myself grossly, and demands to be shown to you — alone."

Brant took the paper. It was a special order from the President, passing Miss Matilda Faulkner through the Federal lines to visit her uncle's home, known as "Gray Oaks," now held and occupied as the headquarters of Brant's Brigade, in order to arrange for the preservation

and disposal of certain family effects and private property that still remained there, or to take and carry away such property; and invoking all necessary aid and assistance from the United States forces in such occupancy. It was countersigned by the division commander. It was perfectly regular and of undoubted authenticity. He had heard of passes of this kind, — the terror of the army, — issued in Washington under some strange controlling influence and against military protest; but he did not let his subordinate see the uneasiness with which it filled him.

"Show her in," he said quietly.

But she had already entered, brushing scornfully past the officer, and drawing her skirt aside, as if contaminated: a very pretty Southern girl, scornful and red-lipped, clad in a gray riding-habit, and still carrying her riding-whip clenched ominously in her slim, gauntleted hand!

"You have my permit in your hand," she said brusquely, hardly raising her eyes to Brant. "I suppose it 's all straight enough, — and even if it is n't, I don't reckon to be kept waiting with those hirelings."

"Your 'permit' is 'straight' enough, Miss Faulkner," said Brant, slowly reading her name from the document before him. "But, as it does not seem to include permission to insult my officers, you will perhaps allow them first to retire."

He made a sign to the officer, who passed out of the door.

As it closed, he went on, in a gentle but coldly unimpassioned voice, —

"I perceive you are a Southern lady, and therefore I need not remind you that it is not considered good form to treat even the slaves of those one does not like uncivilly, and I must, therefore, ask you to keep your active animosity for myself."

The young girl lifted her eyes. She had evidently not

You have my permit in your hand

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expected to meet a man so young, so handsome, so refined, and so coldly invincible in manner. Still less was she prepared for that kind of antagonism. In keeping up her preconcerted attitude towards the "Northern hireling," she had been met with official brusqueness, contemptuous silence, or aggrieved indignation, — but nothing so exasperating as this. She even fancied that this elegant but sardonic-looking soldier was mocking her. She bit her red lip, but, with a scornful gesture of her riding-whip, said, —

"I reckon that your knowledge of Southern ladies is, for certain reasons, not very extensive."

"Pardon me; I have had the honor of marrying one."

Apparently more exasperated than before, she turned upon him abruptly.

"You say my pass is all right. Then I presume I may attend to the business that brought me here."

"Certainly; but you will forgive me if I imagined that an expression of contempt for your hosts was a part of it."

He rang a bell on the table. It was responded to by an orderly.

"Send all the household servants here."

The room was presently filled with the dusky faces of the negro retainers. Here and there was the gleaming of white teeth, but a majority of the assembly wore the true negro serious acceptance of the importance of "an occasion." One or two even affected an official and soldierly bearing. And, as he fully expected, there were several glances of significant recognition of the stranger.

"You will give," said Brant sternly, "every aid and attention to the wants of this young lady, who is here to represent the interests of your old master. As she will be entirely dependent upon you in all things connected with her visit here, see to it that she does not have to complain to me of any inattention, — or be obliged to ask for other assistance."

As Miss Faulkner, albeit a trifle paler in the cheek, but as scornful as ever, was about to follow the servants from the room, Brant stopped her, with a coldly courteous gesture.

"You will understand, therefore, Miss Faulkner, that you have your wish, and that you will not be exposed to any contact with the members of my military family, nor they with you."

"Am I then to be a prisoner in this house — and under a free pass of your — President?" she said indignantly.

"By no means! You are free to come and go, and see whom you please. I have no power to control your actions. But I have the power to control theirs."

She swept furiously from the room.

"That is quite enough to fill her with a desire to flirt with every man here," said Brant to himself, with a faint smile; "but I fancy they have had a taste enough of her quality."

Nevertheless he sat down and wrote a few lines to the division commander, pointing out that he had already placed the owner's private property under strict surveillance, that it was cared for and perfectly preserved by the household servants, and that the pass was evidently obtained as a subterfuge.

To this he received a formal reply, regretting that the authorities at Washington still found it necessary to put this kind of risk and burden on the army in the field, but that the order emanated from the highest authority, and must be strictly obeyed. At the bottom of the page was a characteristic line in pencil in the general's own hand, — "Not the kind that is dangerous."

A flush mounted Brant's cheeks, as if it contained not only a hidden, but a personal significance. He had thought of his own wife!

Singularly enough, a day or two later, at dinner, the

conversation turned upon the intense sectional feeling of Southern women, probably induced by their late experiences. Brant, at the head of the table, in his habitual abstraction, was scarcely following the somewhat excited diction of Colonel Strangeways, one of his staff.

"No, sir," reiterated that indignant warrior, "take my word for it! A Southern woman is n't to be trusted on this point, whether as a sister, sweetheart, or wife. And when she *is* trusted, she 's bound to get the better of the man in any of those relations!"

The dead silence that followed, the ominous joggle of a glass at the speaker's elbow, the quick, sympathetic glance that Brant instinctively felt was directed at his own face, and the abrupt change of subject, could not but arrest his attention, even if he had overlooked the speech. Still his face betrayed nothing. It had never, however, occurred to him before that his family affairs might be known — neither had he ever thought of keeping them a secret. It seemed so purely a personal and private misfortune, that he had never dreamed of its having any public interest. And even now he was a little ashamed of what he believed was his sensitiveness to mere conventional criticism, which, with the instinct of a proud man, he had despised.

He was not far wrong in his sardonic intuition of the effect of his prohibition upon Miss Faulkner's feelings. Certainly that young lady, when not engaged in her mysterious occupation of arranging her uncle's effects, occasionally was seen in the garden, and in the woods beyond. Although her presence was the signal for the "oblique" of any lounging "shoulder-strap," or the vacant "front" of a posted sentry, she seemed to regard their occasional proximity with less active disfavor. Once, when she had mounted the wall to gather a magnolia blossom, the chair by which she had ascended rolled over, leaving her on the

wall. At a signal from the guard-room, two sappers and miners appeared carrying a scaling-ladder, which they placed silently against the wall, and as silently withdrew. On another occasion, the same spirited young lady, whom Brant was satisfied would have probably imperiled her life under fire in devotion to her cause, was brought ignominiously to bay in the field by that most appalling of domestic animals, the wandering and untrammeled cow! Brant could not help smiling as he heard the quick, harsh call to "Turn out, guard," saw the men march stolidly with fixed bayonets to the vicinity of the affrighted animal, who fled, leaving the fair stranger to walk shamefacedly to the house. He was surprised, however, that she should have halted before his door, and with tremulous indignation, said, —

"I thank you, sir, for your chivalrousness in turning a defenseless woman into ridicule!"

"I regret, Miss Faulkner," began Brant gravely, "that you should believe that I am able to control the advances of farmyard cattle as easily as" — But he stopped, as he saw that the angry flash of her blue eyes, as she darted past him, was set in tears. A little remorseful on the following day, he added a word to his ordinary cap-lifting when she went by, but she retained a reproachful silence. Later in the day, he received from her servant a respectful request for an interview, and was relieved to find that she entered his presence with no trace of her former aggression, but rather with the resignation of a deeply injured, yet not entirely unforgiving, woman.

"I thought," she began coldly, "that I ought to inform you that I would probably be able to conclude my business here by the day after to-morrow, and that you would then be relieved of my presence. I am aware — indeed," she added bitterly, "I could scarcely help perceiving, that it has been an exceedingly irksome one."

"I trust," began Brant coldly, "that no gentleman of my command has" —

"No!"

She interrupted him quickly, with a return of her former manner, and a passionate sweep of the hand.

"Do you suppose for a moment that I am speaking — that I am even thinking — of them? What are they to me?"

"Thank you. I am glad to know that they are nothing; and that I may now trust that you have consulted my wishes, and have reserved your animosity solely for me," returned Brant quietly. "That being so, I see no reason for your hurrying your departure in the least."

She rose instantly.

"I have," she said slowly, controlling herself with a slight effort, "found some one who will take my duty off my hands. She is a servant of one of your neighbors, — who is an old friend of my uncle's. The woman is familiar with the house and our private property. I will give her full instructions to act for me, and even an authorization in writing, if you prefer it. She is already in the habit of coming here; but her visits will give you very little trouble. And as she is a slave, or, as you call it, I believe, a chattel, she will be already quite accustomed to the treatment which her class are in the habit of receiving from Northern hands."

Without waiting to perceive the effect of her Parthian shot, she swept proudly out of the room.

"I wonder what she means," mused Brant, as her quick step died away in the passage. "One thing is certain, — a woman like that is altogether too impulsive for a spy."

Later, in the twilight, he saw her walking in the garden. There was a figure at her side. A little curious, he examined it more closely from his window. It was

already familiar to him, — the erect, shapely form of his neighbor's servant. A thoughtful look passed over his face as he muttered, —

"So this is to be her deputy."

CHAPTER III

Called to a general council of officers at divisional headquarters the next day, Brant had little time for further speculation regarding his strange guest, but a remark from the division commander, that he preferred to commit the general plan of a movement then under discussion to their memories rather than to written orders in the ordinary routine, seemed to show that his chief still suspected the existence of a spy. He, therefore, told him of his late interview with Miss Faulkner, and her probable withdrawal in favor of a mulatto neighbor. The division commander received the information with indifference.

"They 're much too clever to employ a hussy like that, who shows her hand at every turn, either as a spy or a messenger of spies, — and the mulattoes are too stupid, to say nothing of their probable fidelity to us. No, General, if we are watched, it is by an eagle, and not a mockingbird. Miss Faulkner has nothing worse about her than her tongue; and there is n't the nigger blood in the whole South that would risk a noose for her, or for any of their masters or mistresses!"

It was, therefore, perhaps, with some mitigation of his usual critical severity that he saw her walking before him alone in the lane as he rode home to quarters. She was apparently lost in a half-impatient, half-moody reverie, which even the trotting hoofbeats of his own and his orderly's horse had not disturbed. From time to time she struck the myrtle hedge beside her with the head of a large flower which hung by its stalk from her listless hands, or

held it to her face as if to inhale its perfume. Dismissing his orderly by a side path, he rode gently forward, but, to his surprise, without turning or seeming to be aware of his presence, she quickened her pace, and even appeared to look from side to side for some avenue of escape. If only to mend matters, he was obliged to ride quickly forward to her side, where he threw himself from his horse, flung the reins on his arm, and began to walk beside her. She at first turned a slightly flushed cheek away from him, and then looked up with a purely simulated start of surprise.

"I am afraid," he said gently, "that I am the first to break my own orders in regard to any intrusion on your privacy. But I wanted to ask you if I could give you any aid whatever in the change you think of making."

He was quite sincere, — had been touched by her manifest disturbance, and, despite his masculine relentlessness of criticism, he had an intuition of feminine suffering that was in itself feminine.

"Meaning, that you are in a hurry to get rid of me," she said curtly, without raising her eyes.

"Meaning that I only wish to expedite a business which I think is unpleasant to you, but which I believe you have undertaken from unselfish devotion."

The scant expression of a reserved nature is sometimes more attractive to women than the most fluent vivacity. Possibly there was also a melancholy grace in this sardonic soldier's manner that affected her, for she looked up, and said impulsively, —

"You think so?"

But he met her eager eyes with some surprise.

"I certainly do," he replied more coldly. "I can imagine your feelings on finding your uncle's home in the possession of your enemies, and your presence under the family roof only a sufferance. I can hardly believe it a

pleasure to you, or a task you would have accepted for yourself alone."

"But," she said, turning towards him wickedly, "what if I did it only to excite my revenge; what if I knew it would give me courage to incite my people to carry war into your own homes; to make you of the North feel as I feel, and taste our bitterness?"

"I could easily understand that, too," he returned, with listless coldness, "although I don't admit that revenge is an unmixed pleasure, even to a woman."

"A woman!" she repeated indignantly. "There is no sex in a war like this."

"You are spoiling your flower," he said quietly. "It is very pretty, and a native one, too; not an invader, or even transplanted. May I look at it?"

She hesitated, half recoiling for an instant, and her hand trembled. Then, suddenly and abruptly she said, with a hysteric little laugh, "Take it, then," and almost thrust it in his hand.

It certainly was a pretty flower, not unlike a lily in appearance, with a bell-like cup and long anthers covered with a fine pollen, like red dust. As he lifted it to his face, to inhale its perfume, she uttered a slight cry, and snatched it from his hand.

"There!" she said, with the same nervous laugh. "I knew you would; I ought to have warned you. The pollen comes off so easily, and leaves a stain. And you 've got some on your cheek. Look!" she continued, taking her handkerchief from her pocket and wiping his cheek; "see there!" The delicate cambric showed a blood-red streak.

"It grows in a swamp," she continued, in the same excited strain; "we call it dragon's teeth, — like the kind that was sown in the story, you know. We children used to find it, and then paint our faces and lips with it. We

called it our rouge. I was almost tempted to try it again when I found it just now. It took me back so to the old times."

Following her odd manner rather than her words, as she turned her face towards him suddenly, Brant was inclined to think that she had tried it already, so scarlet was her cheek. But it presently paled again under his cold scrutiny.

"You must miss the old times," he said calmly. "I am afraid you found very little of them left, except in these flowers."

"And hardly these," she said bitterly. "Your troops had found a way through the marsh, and had trampled down the bushes."

Brant's brow clouded. He remembered that the brook, which had run red during the fight, had lost itself in this marsh. It did not increase his liking for this beautiful but blindly vicious animal at his side, and even his momentary pity for her was fading fast. She was incorrigible. They walked on for a few moments in silence.

"You said," she began at last, in a gentler and even hesitating voice, "that your wife was a Southern woman."

He checked an irritated start with difficulty.

"I believe I did," he said coldly, as if he regretted it.

"And of course you taught her *your* gospel, — the gospel according to St. Lincoln. Oh, I know," she went on hurriedly, as if conscious of his irritation and seeking to allay it. "She was a woman and loved you, and thought with your thoughts and saw only with your eyes. Yes, that 's the way with us, — I suppose we all do it!" she added bitterly.

"She had her own opinions," said Brant briefly, as he recovered himself.

Nevertheless, his manner so decidedly closed all further discussion that there was nothing left for the young girl

but silence. But it was broken by her in a few moments in her old contemptuous voice and manner.

"Pray don't trouble yourself to accompany me any further, General Brant. Unless, of course, you are afraid I may come across some of your — your soldiers. I promise you I won't eat them."

"I am afraid you must suffer my company a little longer, Miss Faulkner, on account of those same soldiers," returned Brant gravely. "You may not know that this road, in which I find you, takes you through a cordon of pickets. If you were alone you would be stopped, questioned, and, failing to give the password, you would be detained, sent to the guard-house, and" — he stopped, and fixed his eyes on her keenly as he added, "and searched."

"You would not dare to search a woman!" she said indignantly, although her flush gave way to a slight pallor.

"You said just now that there should be no sex in a war like this," returned Brant carelessly, but without abating his scrutinizing gaze.

"Then it *is* war?" she said quickly, with a white, significant face.

His look of scrutiny turned to one of puzzled wonder. But at the same moment there was the flash of a bayonet in the hedge, a voice called "Halt!" and a soldier stepped into the road.

General Brant advanced, met the salute of the picket with a few formal words, and then turned towards his fair companion, as another soldier and a sergeant joined the group.

"Miss Faulkner is new to the camp, took the wrong turning, and was unwittingly leaving the lines when I joined her." He fixed his eyes intently on her now colorless face, but she did not return his look. "You will show her the shortest way to quarters," he continued, to the sergeant, "and should she at any time again lose her

way, you will again conduct her home, — but without detaining or reporting her."

He lifted his cap, remounted his horse, and rode away, as the young girl, with a proud, indifferent step, moved down the road with the sergeant. A mounted officer passed him and saluted, — it was one of his own staff. From some strange instinct, he knew that he had witnessed the scene, and from some equally strange intuition he was annoyed by it. But he continued his way, visiting one or two outposts, and returned by a long détour to his quarters. As he stepped upon the veranda he saw Miss Faulkner at the bottom of the garden talking with some one across the hedge. By the aid of his glass he could recognize the shapely figure of the mulatto woman which he had seen before. But by its aid he also discovered that she was carrying a flower exactly like the one which Miss Faulkner still held in her hand. Had she been with Miss Faulkner in the lane, and if so, why had she disappeared when he came up? Impelled by something stronger than mere curiosity, he walked quickly down the garden, but she evidently had noticed him, for she as quickly disappeared. Not caring to meet Miss Faulkner again, he retraced his steps, resolving that he would, on the first opportunity, personally examine and interrogate this new visitor. For if she were to take Miss Faulkner's place in a subordinate capacity, this precaution was clearly within his rights.

He reëntered his room and seated himself at his desk before the dispatches, orders, and reports awaiting him. He found himself, however, working half mechanically, and recurring to his late interview with Miss Faulkner in the lane. If she had any inclination to act the spy, or to use her position here as a means of communicating with the enemy's lines, he thought he had thoroughly frightened her. Nevertheless, now, for the first time, he was inclined

to accept his chief's opinion of her. She was not only too clumsy and inexperienced, but she totally lacked the self-restraint of a spy. Her nervous agitation in the lane was due to something more disturbing than his mere possible intrusion upon her confidences with the mulatto. The significance of her question, "Then it *is* war?" was at best a threat, and that implied hesitation. He recalled her strange allusion to his wife; was it merely the outcome of his own foolish confession on their first interview, or was it a concealed ironical taunt? Being satisfied, however, that she was not likely to imperil his public duty in any way, he was angry with himself for speculating further. But, although he still felt towards her the same antagonism she had at first provoked, he was conscious that she was beginning to exercise a strange fascination over him.

Dismissing her at last with an effort, he finished his work and then rose, and, unlocking a closet, took out a small dispatch-box, to which he intended to intrust a few more important orders and memoranda. As he opened it with a key on his watch-chain, he was struck with a faint perfume that seemed to come from it, — a perfume that he remembered. Was it the smell of the flower that Miss Faulkner carried, or the scent of the handkerchief with which she had wiped his cheek, or a mingling of both? Or was he under some spell to think of that wretched girl, and her witch-like flower? He leaned over the box and suddenly started. Upon the outer covering of a dispatch was a singular blood-red streak! He examined it closely, — it was the powdery stain of the lily pollen, — exactly as he had seen it on her handkerchief.

There could be no mistake. He passed his finger over the stain; he could still feel the slippery, infinitesimal powder of the pollen. It was not there when he had closed the box that morning; it was impossible that it

should be there unless the box had been opened in his absence. He reëxamined the contents of the box; the papers were all there. More than that, they were papers of no importance except to him personally; contained no plans nor key to any military secret; he had been far too wise to intrust any to the accidents of this alien house. The prying intruder, whoever it was, had gained nothing! But there was unmistakably the attempt! And the existence of a would-be spy within the purlieus of the house was equally clear.

He called an officer from the next room.

"Has any one been here since my absence?"

"No, General."

"Has any one passed through the hall?"

He had fully anticipated the answer, as the subaltern replied, "Only the women servants."

He reëntered the room. Closing the door, he again carefully examined the box, his table, the papers upon it, the chair before it, and even the Chinese matting on the floor, for any further indication of the pollen. It hardly seemed possible that any one could have entered the room with the flower in their hand without scattering some of the telltale dust elsewhere; it was too large a flower to be worn on the breast or in the hair. Again, no one would have dared to linger there long enough to have made an examination of the box, with an officer in the next room, and the sergeant passing. The box had been removed, and the examination made elsewhere!

An idea seized him. Miss Faulkner was still absent, the mulatto had apparently gone home. He quickly mounted the staircase, but, instead of entering his room, turned suddenly aside into the wing which had been reserved. The first door yielded as he turned its knob gently and entered a room which he at once recognized as the "young lady's boudoir." But the dusty and draped

furniture had been rearranged and uncovered, and the apartment bore every sign of present use. Yet, although there was unmistakable evidence of its being used by a person of taste and refinement, he was surprised to see that the garments hanging in an open press were such as were used by negro servants, and that a gaudy handkerchief such as housemaids used for turbans was lying on the pretty silk coverlet. He did not linger over these details, but cast a rapid glance round the room. Then his eyes became fixed on a fanciful writing-desk, which stood by the window. For, in a handsome vase placed on its level top, and drooping on a portfolio below, hung a cluster of the very flowers that Miss Faulkner had carried!

CHAPTER IV

It seemed plain to Brant that the dispatch-box had been conveyed here and opened for security on this desk, and in the hurry of examining the papers the flower had been jostled and the fallen grains of pollen overlooked by the spy. There were one or two freckles of red on the desk, which made this accident appear the more probable. But he was equally struck by another circumstance. The desk stood immediately before the window. As he glanced mechanically from it, he was surprised to see that it commanded an extensive view of the slope below the eminence on which the house stood, even beyond his furthest line of pickets. The vase of flowers, each of which was nearly as large as a magnolia blossom, and striking in color, occupied a central position before it, and no doubt could be quite distinctly seen from a distance. From this circumstance he could not resist the strong impression that this fateful and extraordinary blossom, carried by Miss Faulkner and the mulatto, and so strikingly "in evidence" at the window, was in some way a signal. Obeying an impulse which he was conscious had a half-superstitious foundation, he carefully lifted the vase from its position before the window, and placed it on a side table. Then he cautiously slipped from the room.

But he could not easily shake off the perplexity which the occurrence had caused, although he was satisfied that it was fraught with no military or strategic danger to his command, and that the unknown spy had obtained no information whatever. Yet he was forced to admit to him-

self that he was more concerned in his attempts to justify the conduct of Miss Faulkner with this later revelation. It was quite possible that the dispatch-box had been purloined by some one else during her absence from the house, as the presence of the mulatto servant in his room would have been less suspicious than hers. There was really little evidence to connect Miss Faulkner with the actual outrage, — rather might not the real spy have taken advantage of her visit here, to throw suspicion upon her? He remembered her singular manner, — the strange inconsistency with which she had forced this flower upon him. She would hardly have done so had she been conscious of its having so serious an import. Yet, what was the secret of her manifest agitation? A sudden inspiration flashed across his mind; a smile came upon his lips. She was in love! The enemy's line contained some sighing Strephon of a young subaltern with whom she was in communication, and for whom she had undertaken this quest. The flower was their language of correspondence, no doubt. It explained also the young girl's animosity against the younger officers, — his adversaries; against himself, — their commander. He had previously wondered why, if she were indeed a spy, she had not chosen, upon some equally specious order from Washington, the headquarters of the division commander, whose secrets were more valuable. This was explained by the fact that she was nearer the lines and her lover in her present abode. He had no idea that he was making excuses for her, — he believed himself only just. The recollection of what she had said of the power of love, albeit it had hurt him cruelly at the time, was now clearer to him, and even seemed to mitigate her offense. She would be here but a day or two longer; he could afford to wait without interrogating her.

But as to the real intruder, spy or thief, — that was another affair, and quickly settled. He gave an order to

the officer of the day peremptorily forbidding the entrance of alien servants or slaves within the precincts of the headquarters. Any one thus trespassing was to be brought before him. The officer looked surprised, he even fancied disappointed. The graces of the mulatto woman's figure had evidently not been thrown away upon his subalterns.

An hour or two later, when he was mounting his horse for a round of inspection, he was surprised to see Miss Faulkner, accompanied by the mulatto woman, running hurriedly to the house. He had forgotten his late order until he saw the latter halted by the sentries, but the young girl came flying on, regardless of her companion. Her skirt was held in one hand, her straw hat had fallen back in her flight, and was caught only by a ribbon around her swelling throat, and her loosened hair lay in a black rippled loop on one shoulder. For an instant Brant thought that she was seeking him in indignation at his order, but a second look at her set face, eager eyes, and parted scarlet lips, showed him that she had not even noticed him in the concentration of her purpose. She swept by him into the hall, he heard the swish of her skirt and rapid feet on the stairs, — she was gone. What had happened, or was this another of her moods?

But he was called to himself by the apparition of a corporal standing before him, with the mulatto woman, — the first capture under his order. She was tall, well-formed, but unmistakably showing the negro type, even in her small features. Her black eyes were excited, but unintelligent; her manner dogged, but with the obstinacy of half-conscious stupidity. Brant felt not only disappointed, but had a singular impression that she was not the same woman that he had first seen. Yet there was the tall, graceful figure, the dark profile, and the turbaned head that he had once followed down the passage by his room.

Her story was as stupidly simple. She had known

"Missy" from a chile! She had just traipsed over to see her that afternoon; they were walking together when the sojers stopped her. She had never been stopped before, even by "the patter rollers."[1] Her old massa (Manly) had gib leaf to go see Miss Tilly, and had n't said nuffin about no "orders."

More annoyed than he cared to confess, Brant briefly dismissed her with a warning. As he cantered down the slope the view of the distant pickets recalled the window in the wing, and he turned in his saddle to look at it. There it was — the largest and most dominant window in that part of the building — and within it, a distinct and vivid object almost filling the opening, was the vase of flowers, which he had a few hours ago removed, *restored to its original position!* He smiled. The hurried entrance and consternation of Miss Faulkner were now fully explained. He had interrupted some impassioned message, perhaps even countermanded some affectionate rendezvous beyond the lines. And it seemed to settle the fact that it was she who had done the signaling! But would not this also make her cognizant of the taking of the dispatch-box? He reflected, however, that the room was apparently occupied by the mulatto woman, — he remembered the calico dresses and turban on the bed, — and it was possible that Miss Faulkner had only visited it for the purpose of signaling to her lover. Although this circumstance did not tend to make his mind easier, it was, however, presently diverted by a new arrival and a strange recognition.

As he rode through the camp a group of officers, congregated before a large mess tent, appeared to be highly amused by the conversation — half monologue and half harangue — of a singular-looking individual who stood in the centre. He wore a "slouch" hat, to the band of which he had

[1] That is, patrols, — a civic home-guard in the South that kept surveillance of slaves.

imparted a military air by the addition of a gold cord, but the brim was caught up at the side in a peculiarly theatrical and highly artificial fashion. A heavy cavalry sabre depended from a broad-buckled belt under his black frock coat, with the addition of two revolvers — minus their holsters — stuck on either side of the buckle, after the style of a stage smuggler. A pair of long enameled leather riding boots, with the tops turned deeply over, as if they had once done duty for the representative of a cavalier, completed his extraordinary equipment. The group were so absorbed in him that they did not perceive the approach of their chief and his orderly; and Brant, with a sign to the latter, halted only a few paces from this central figure. His speech was a singular mingling of high-flown and exalted epithets, with inexact pronunciation and occasional lapses of Western slang.

"Well, I ain't purtendin' to any stratutegical smartness, and I didn't gradooate at West Point as one of those Apocryphal Engineers; I don't do much talking about 'flank' movements or 'recognizances in force' or 'Ekellon skirmishing,' but when it comes down to square Ingin fightin', I reckon I kin have my say. There are men who don't know the Army Contractor," he added darkly, "who mebbe have heard of 'Red Jim.' I don't mention names, gentlemen, but only the other day a man that you all know says to me, 'If I only knew what you do about scoutin' I would n't be wanting for information as I do.' I ain't goin' to say who it was, or break any confidences between gentlemen by saying how many stars he had on his shoulder-strap; but he was a man who knew what he was saying. And I say agin, gentlemen, that the curse of the Northern Army is the want of proper scoutin'. What was it caused Bull's Run? — Want o' scoutin'. What was it rolled up Pope? — Want o' scoutin'. What caused the slaughter at the Wilderness? — Want o' scoutin' — Ingin

scoutin'! Why, only the other day, gentlemen, I was approached to know what I'd take to organize a scoutin' force. And what did I say? — 'No, General; it ain't because I represent one of the largest Army Beef Contracts in this country,' says I. 'It ain't because I belong, so to speak, to the "Sinews of War;" but because I'd want about ten thousand trained Ingins from the Reservations!' And the regular West Point, high-toned, scientific inkybus that weighs so heavily on our army don't see it — and won't have it! Then Sherman, he sez to me" —

But here a roar of laughter interrupted him, and in the cross fire of sarcastic interrogations that began Brant saw, with relief, a chance of escape. For in the voice, manner, and, above all, the characteristic temperament of the stranger, he had recognized his old playmate and the husband of Susy, — the redoubtable Jim Hooker! There was no mistaking that gloomy audacity; that mysterious significance; that magnificent lying. But even at that moment Clarence Brant's heart had gone out, with all his old loyalty of feeling, towards his old companion. He knew that a public recognition of him then and there would plunge Hooker into confusion; he felt keenly the ironical plaudits and laughter of his officers over the manifest weakness and vanity of the ex-teamster, ex-rancher, ex-actor, and husband of his old girl sweetheart, and would have spared him the knowledge that he had overheard it. Turning hastily to the orderly, he bade him bring the stranger to his headquarters, and rode away unperceived.

He had heard enough, however, to account for his presence there, and the singular chance that had brought them again together. He was evidently one of those large civil contractors of supplies whom the Government was obliged to employ, who visited the camp half officially, and whom the army alternately depended upon and abused. Brant had dealt with his underlings in the Commissariat, and

even now remembered that he had heard he was coming, but had overlooked the significance of his name. But how he came to leave his theatrical profession, how he had attained a position which implied a command of considerable capital, — for many of the contractors had already amassed large fortunes, — and what had become of Susy and her ambitions in this radical change of circumstances, were things still to be learned. In his own changed conditions he had seldom thought of her; it was with a strange feeling of irritation and half responsibility that he now recalled their last interview and the emotion to which he had yielded.

He had not long to wait. He had scarcely regained the quarters at his own private office before he heard the step of the orderly upon the veranda and the trailing clank of Hooker's sabre. He did not know, however, that Hooker, without recognizing his name, had received the message as a personal tribute, and had left his sarcastic companions triumphantly, with the air of going to a confidential interview, to which his well-known military criticism had entitled him. It was with a bearing of gloomy importance and his characteristic, sullen, sidelong glance that he entered the apartment and did not look up until Brant had signaled the orderly to withdraw, and closed the door behind him. And then he recognized his old boyish companion — the preferred favorite of fortune!

For a moment he gasped with astonishment. For a moment gloomy incredulity, suspicion, delight, pride, admiration, even affection, struggled for mastery in his sullen, staring eyes and open, twitching mouth. For here was Clarence Brant, handsomer than ever, more superior than ever, in the majesty of uniform and authority which fitted him — the younger man — by reason of his four years of active service, with the careless ease and bearing of the veteran! Here was the hero whose name was already so

famous that the mere coincidence of it with that of the modest civilian he had known would have struck him as preposterous. Yet here he was — supreme and dazzling — surrounded by the pomp and circumstance of war — into whose reserved presence he, Jim Hooker, had been ushered with the formality of challenge, saluting, and presented bayonets!

Luckily, Brant had taken advantage of his first gratified ejaculation to shake him warmly by the hand, and then, with both hands laid familiarly on his shoulder, force him down into a chair. Luckily, for by that time Jim Hooker had, with characteristic gloominess, found time to taste the pangs of envy — an envy the more keen since, in spite of his success as a peaceful contractor, he had always secretly longed for military display and distinction. He looked at the man who had achieved it, as he firmly believed, by sheer luck and accident, and his eyes darkened. Then, with characteristic weakness and vanity, he began to resist his first impressions of Clarence's superiority, and to air his own importance. He leaned heavily back in the chair in which he had been thus genially forced, drew off his gauntlet and attempted to thrust it through his belt, as he had seen Brant do, but failed on account of his pistols already occupying that position, dropped it, got his sword between his legs in attempting to pick it up, and then leaned back again, with half-closed eyes serenely indifferent of his old companion's smiling face.

"I reckon," he began slowly, with a slightly patronizing air, "that we 'd have met, sooner or later, at Washington, or at Grant's headquarters, for Hooker, Meacham & Co. go everywhere, and are about as well known as major-generals, to say nothin'," he went on, with a sidelong glance at Brant's shoulder-straps, "of brigadiers; and it 's rather strange — only, of course, you 're kind of fresh in the service — that you ain't heard of me afore."

"But I 'm very glad to hear of you now, Jim," said

Brant, smiling, "and from your own lips — which I am also delighted to find," he added mischievously, "are still as frankly communicative on that topic as of old. But I congratulate you, old fellow, on your good fortune. When did you leave the stage?"

Mr. Hooker frowned slightly.

"I never was really on the stage, you know," he said, waving his hand with assumed negligence. "Only went on to please my wife. Mrs. Hooker would n't act with vulgar professionals, don't you see! I was really manager most of the time, and lessee of the theatre. Went East when the war broke out, to offer my sword and knowledge of Ingin fightin' to Uncle Sam! Drifted into a big pork contract at St. Louis, with Fremont. Been at it ever since. Offered a commission in the reg'lar service lots o' times. Refused."

"Why?" asked Brant demurely.

"Too much West Point starch around to suit *me*," returned Hooker darkly. "And too many spies!"

"Spies?" echoed Brant abstractedly, with a momentary reminiscence of Miss Faulkner.

"Yes, spies," continued Hooker, with dogged mystery. "One half of Washington is watching t' other half, and, from the President's wife down, most of the women are secesh!"

Brant suddenly fixed his keen eyes on his guest. But the next moment he reflected that this was only Jim Hooker's usual speech, and possessed no ulterior significance. He smiled again, and said more gently, —

"And how is Mrs. Hooker?"

Mr. Hooker fixed his eyes on the ceiling, rose, and pretended to look out of the window; then, taking his seat again by the table, as if fronting an imaginary audience, and pulling slowly at his gauntlets after the usual theatrical indication of perfect *sang froid*, said, —

"There ain't any!"

"Good heavens!" said Brant, with genuine emotion. "I beg your pardon. Really, I"—

"Mrs. Hooker and me are divorced," continued Hooker, slightly changing his attitude, and leaning heavily on his sabre, with his eyes still on his fanciful audience. "There was, you understand," — lightly tossing his gauntlet aside, — "incompatibility of temper — and — we — parted! Ha!"

He uttered a low, bitter, scornful laugh, which, however, produced the distinct impression in Brant's mind that up to that moment he had never had the slightest feeling in the matter whatever.

"You seemed to be on such good terms with each other!" murmured Brant vaguely.

"Seemed!" said Hooker bitterly, glancing sardonically at an ideal second row in the pit before him, "yes — seemed! There were other differences, social and political. You understand that; you have suffered, too." He reached out his hand and pressed Brant's, in heavy effusiveness. "But," he continued haughtily, lightly tossing his glove again, "we are also men of the world; we let that pass."

And it was possible that he found the strain of his present attitude too great, for he changed to an easier position.

"But," said Brant curiously, "I always thought that Mrs. Hooker was intensely Union and Northern?"

"Put on!" said Hooker, in his natural voice.

"But you remember the incident of the flag?" persisted Brant.

"Mrs. Hooker was always an actress," said Hooker significantly. "But," he added cheerfully, "Mrs. Hooker is now the wife of Senator Boompointer, one of the wealthiest and most powerful Republicans in Washington — carries the patronage of the whole West in his vest pocket."

"Yet, if she is not a Republican, why did she" — began Brant.

"For a purpose," replied Hooker darkly. "But," he added again, with greater cheerfulness, "she belongs to the very *élite* of Washington society. Goes to all the foreign ambassadors' balls, and is a power at the White House. Her picture is in all the first-class illustrated papers."

The singular but unmistakable pride of the man in the importance of the wife from whom he was divorced, and for whom he did not care, would have offended Brant's delicacy, or at least have excited his ridicule, but for the reason that he was more deeply stung by Hooker's allusion to his own wife and his degrading similitude of their two conditions. But he dismissed the former as part of Hooker's invincible and still boyish extravagance, and the latter as part of his equally characteristic assumption. Perhaps he was conscious, too, notwithstanding the lapse of years and the condonation of separation and forgetfulness, that he deserved little delicacy from the hands of Susy's husband. Nevertheless, he dreaded to hear him speak again of her; and the fear was realized in a question.

"Does she know you are here?"

"Who?" said Brant curtly.

"Your wife. That is — I reckon she 's your wife still, eh?"

"Yes; but I do not know what she knows," returned Brant quietly. He had regained his self-composure.

"Susy, — Mrs. Senator Boompointer, that is," — said Hooker, with an apparent dignity in his late wife's new title, "allowed that she 'd gone abroad on a secret mission from the Southern Confederacy to them crowned heads over there. She was good at ropin' men in, you know. Anyhow, Susy, afore she was Mrs. Boompointer, was dead set on findin' out where she was, but never could. She

seemed to drop out of sight a year ago. Some said one thing, and some said another. But you can bet your bottom dollar that Mrs. Senator Boompointer, who knows how to pull all the wires in Washington, will know, if any one does."

"But is Mrs. Boompointer really disaffected, and a Southern sympathizer?" said Brant, "or is it only caprice or fashion?"

While speaking he had risen, with a half-abstracted face, and had gone to the window, where he stood in a listening attitude. Presently he opened the window, and stepped outside. Hooker wonderingly followed him. One or two officers had already stepped out of their rooms, and were standing upon the veranda; another had halted in the path. Then one quickly reëntered the house, reappeared with his cap and sword in his hand, and ran lightly toward the guard-house. A slight crackling noise seemed to come from beyond the garden wall.

"What 's up?" said Hooker, with staring eyes.

"Picket firing!"

The crackling suddenly became a long rattle. Brant reëntered the room, and picked up his hat.

"You 'll excuse me for a few moments?"

A faint sound, soft yet full, and not unlike a bursting bubble, made the house appear to leap elastically, like the rebound of a rubber ball.

"What 's that?" gasped Hooker.

"Cannon, out of range!"

CHAPTER V

In another instant bugles were ringing through the camp, with the hurrying hoofs of the officers' horses and the trampling of forming men. The house itself was almost deserted. Although the single cannon-shot had been enough to show that it was no mere skirmishing of pickets, Brant still did not believe in any serious attack of the enemy. His position, as in the previous engagement, had no strategic importance to them; they were no doubt only making a feint against it to conceal some advance upon the centre of the army two miles away. Satisfied that he was in easy supporting distance of his division commander, he extended his line along the ridge, ready to fall back in that direction, while retarding their advance and masking the position of his own chief. He gave a few orders necessary to the probable abandonment of the house, and then returned to it. Shot and shell were already dropping in the field below. A thin ridge of blue haze showed the line of skirmish fire. A small conical, white cloud, like a bursting cotton-pod, revealed an open battery in the willow-fringed meadow. Yet the pastoral peacefulness of the house was unchanged. The afternoon sun lay softly on its deep verandas; the *pot pourri* incense of fallen rose-leaves haunted it still.

He entered his room through the French window on the veranda, when the door leading from the passage was suddenly flung open, and Miss Faulkner swept quickly inside, closed the door behind her, and leaned back against it, panting and breathless.

Clarence was startled, and for a moment ashamed. He had suddenly realized that in the excitement he had entirely forgotten her and the dangers to which she might be exposed. She had probably heard the firing, her womanly fears had been awakened; she had come to him for protection. But as he turned towards her with a reassuring smile, he was shocked to see that her agitation and pallor were far beyond any physical cause. She motioned him desperately to shut the window by which he had entered, and said, with white lips, —

"I must speak with you alone!"

"Certainly. But there is no immediate danger to you even here — and I can soon put you beyond the reach of any possible harm."

"Harm — to me! God! if it were only that!"

He stared at her uneasily.

"Listen," she said gaspingly, "listen to me! Then hate, despise me — kill me if you will. For you are betrayed and ruined — cut off and surrounded! It has been helped on by me, but I swear to you the blow did not come from *my* hand. I would have saved you. God only knows how it happened — it was Fate!"

In an instant Brant saw the whole truth instinctively and clearly. But with the revelation came the usual calmness and perfect self-possession which never yet had failed him in any emergency. With the sound of the increasing cannonade and its shifting position made clearer to his ears, the view of his whole threatened position spread out like a map before his eyes, the swift calculation in his mind of the time his men could hold the ridge — even a hurried estimate of the precious moments he could give to the wretched woman before him — he even then, gravely and gently, led her to a chair and said in a calm voice, —

"That is not enough! Speak slowly, plainly. I must

know everything. How and in what way have you be trayed me?"

She looked at him imploringly — reassured, yet awed by his gentleness.

"You won't believe me; you cannot believe me! for I do not even know. I have taken and exchanged letters — whose contents I never saw — between the Confederate and a spy who comes to this house, but who is far away by this time. I did it because I thought you hated and despised me — because I thought it was my duty to help my cause — because you said it was 'war' between us — but I never spied on you. I swear it."

"Then how do you know of this attack?" he said calmly.

She brightened, half timidly, half hopefully.

"There is a window in the wing of this house that overlooks the slope near the Confederate lines. There was a signal placed in it — not by me — but I know it means that as long as it was there the plot, whatever it was, was not ripe, and that no attack would be made on you as long as it was visible. That much I know, — that much the spy had to tell me, for we both had to guard that room in turns. I wanted to keep this dreadful thing off — until" — her voice trembled, "until," she added hurriedly, seeing his calm eyes were reading her very soul, "until I went away — and for that purpose I withheld some of the letters that were given me. But to-day, while I was away from the house, I looked back and saw that the signal was no longer there. Some one had changed it. I ran back, but I was too late — God help me! — as you see."

The truth flashed upon Brant. It was his own hand that had precipitated the attack. But a larger truth came to him now, like a dazzling inspiration. If he had thus precipitated the attack before they were ready, there was a chance that it was imperfect, and there was still hope.

But there was no trace of this visible in his face as he fixed his eyes calmly on hers, although his pulses were halting in expectancy as he said, —

"Then the spy had suspected you, and changed it."

"Oh, no," she said eagerly, "for the spy was with me and was frightened too. We both ran back together — you remember — she was stopped by the patrol!"

She checked herself suddenly, but too late. Her cheeks blazed, her head sank, with the foolish identification of the spy into which her eagerness had betrayed her.

But Brant appeared not to notice it. He was, in fact, puzzling his brain to conceive what information the stupid mulatto woman could have obtained here. His strength, his position was no secret to the enemy — there was nothing to gain from him. She must have been, like the trembling, eager woman before him, a mere tool of others.

"Did this woman live here?" he said.

"No," she said. "She lived with the Manlys, but had friends whom she visited at your general's headquarters."

With difficulty Brant suppressed a start. It was clear to him now. The information had been obtained at the division headquarters, and passed through his camp as being nearest the Confederate lines. But what was the information — and what movement had he precipitated? It was clear that this woman did not know. He looked at her keenly. A sudden explosion shook the house, — a drift of smoke passed the window, — a shell had burst in the garden.

She had been gazing at him despairingly, wistfully — but did not blanch or start.

An idea took possession of him. He approached her, and took her cold hand. A half smile parted her pale lips.

"You have courage — you have devotion," he said gravely. "I believe you regret the step you have taken. If you could undo what you have done, even at peril to yourself, dare you do it?"

"Yes," she said breathlessly.

"You are known to the enemy. If I am surrounded, you could pass through their lines unquestioned?"

"Yes," she said eagerly.

"A note from me would pass you again through the pickets of our headquarters. But you would bear a note to the general that no eyes but his must see. It would not implicate you or yours; would only be a word of warning."

"And you," she said quickly, "would be saved! They would come to your assistance! You would not then be taken?"

He smiled gently.

"Perhaps — who knows!"

He sat down and wrote hurriedly.

"This," he said, handing her a slip of paper, "is a pass. You will use it beyond your own lines. This note," he continued, handing her a sealed envelope, "is for the general. No one else must see it or know of it — not even your lover, should you meet him!"

"My lover!" she said indignantly, with a flash of her old savagery; "what do you mean? I have no lover!"

Brant glanced at her flushed face.

"I thought," he said quietly, "that there was some one you cared for in yonder lines — some one you wrote to. It would have been an excuse" —

He stopped, as her face paled again, and her hands dropped heavily at her side.

"Good God! — you thought that, too! You thought that I would sacrifice you for another man!"

"Pardon me," said Brant quickly. "I was foolish. But whether your lover is a man or a cause, you have shown a woman's devotion. And, in repairing your fault, you are showing more than a woman's courage now."

To his surprise, the color had again mounted her pretty

cheeks, and even a flash of mischief shone in her blue eyes.

"It would have been an excuse," she murmured, "yes — to save a man, surely!" Then she said quickly, "I will go. At once! I am ready!"

"One moment," he said gravely. "Although this pass and an escort insure your probable safe conduct, this is 'war' and danger! You are still a spy! Are you ready to go?"

"I am," she said proudly, tossing back a braid of her fallen hair. Yet a moment after she hesitated. Then she said, in a lower voice, "Are you ready to forgive?"

"In either case," he said, touched by her manner; "and God speed you!"

He extended his hand, and left a slight pressure on her cold fingers. But they slipped quickly from his grasp, and she turned away with a heightened color.

He stepped to the door. One or two aides-de-camp, withheld by his order against intrusion, were waiting eagerly with reports. The horse of a mounted field officer was pawing the garden turf. The officers stared at the young girl.

"Take Miss Faulkner, with a flag, to some safe point of the enemy's line. She is a noncombatant of their own, and will receive their protection."

He had scarcely exchanged a dozen words with the aide-de-camp before the field officer hurriedly entered. Taking Brant aside, he said quickly, —

"Pardon me, General; but there is a strong feeling among the men that this attack is the result of some information obtained by the enemy. You must know that the woman you have just given a safeguard to is suspected, and the men are indignant."

"The more reason why she should be conveyed beyond any consequences of their folly, Major," said Brant frigidly, "and I look to you for her safe convoy. There is

nothing in this attack to show that the enemy has received any information regarding us. But I would suggest that it would be better to see that my orders are carried out regarding the slaves and noncombatants who are passing our lines from divisional headquarters, where valuable information may be obtained, than in the surveillance of a testy and outspoken girl."

An angry flush crossed the major's cheek as he saluted and fell back, and Brant turned to the aide-de-camp. The news was grave. The column of the enemy was moving against the ridge — it was no longer possible to hold it — and the brigade was cut off from its communication with the divisional headquarters, although as yet no combined movement was made against it. Brant's secret fears that it was an intended impact against the centre were confirmed. Would his communication to the divisional commander pass through the attacking column in time?

Yet one thing puzzled him. The enemy, after forcing his flank, had shown no disposition, even with their overwhelming force, to turn aside and crush him. He could easily have fallen back, when it was possible to hold the ridge no longer, without pursuit. His other flank and rear were not threatened, as they might have been, by the division of so large an attacking column, which was moving steadily on towards the ridge. It was this fact that seemed to show a failure or imperfection in the enemy's plan. It was possible that his precipitation of the attack by the changed signal had been the cause of it. Doubtless some provision had been made to attack him in flank and rear, but in the unexpected hurry of the onset it had to be abandoned. He could still save himself, as his officers knew; but his conviction that he might yet be able to support his divisional commander by holding his position doggedly, but coolly awaiting his opportunity, was strong. More than that, it was his temperament and instinct.

Harrying them in flank and rear, contesting the ground inch by inch, and holding his own against the artillery sent to dislodge him, or the outriding cavalry that, circling round, swept through his open ranks, he saw his files melt away beside this steady current without flinching.

CHAPTER VI

Yet all along the fateful ridge — now obscured and confused with thin crossing smoke-drifts from file-firing, like partly rubbed-out slate-pencil marks; or else, when cleared of those drifts, presenting only an indistinguishable map of zigzag lines of straggling wagons and horses, unintelligible to any eye but his — the singular magnetism of the chief was felt everywhere: whether it was shown in the quick closing in of resistance to some sharper onset of the enemy or the more dogged stand of inaction under fire, his power was always dominant. A word or two of comprehensive direction sent through an aide-de-camp, or the sudden relief of his dark, watchful, composed face uplifted above a line of bayonets, never failed in their magic. Like all born leaders, he seemed in these emergencies to hold a charmed life — infecting his followers with a like disbelief in death; men dropped to right and left of him with serene assurance in their ghastly faces or a cry of life and confidence in their last gasp. Stragglers fell in and closed up under his passing glance; a hopeless, inextricable wrangle around an overturned caisson, at a turn of the road, resolved itself into an orderly, quiet, deliberate clearing away of the impediment before the significant waiting of that dark, silent horseman.

Yet under this imperturbable mask he was keenly conscious of everything; in that apparent concentration there was a sharpening of all his senses and his impressibility: he saw the first trace of doubt or alarm in the face of a subaltern to whom he was giving an order; the first touch

of sluggishness in a re-forming line; the more significant clumsiness of a living evolution that he knew was clogged by the dead bodies of comrades; the ominous silence of a breastwork; the awful inertia of some rigidly kneeling files beyond, which still kept their form but never would move again; the melting away of skirmish points; the sudden gaps here and there; the sickening incurving of what a moment before had been a straight line — all these he saw in all their fatal significance. But even at this moment, coming upon a hasty barricade of overset commissary wagons, he stopped to glance at a familiar figure he had seen but an hour ago, who now seemed to be commanding a group of collected stragglers and camp followers. Mounted on a wheel, with a revolver in each hand and a bowie knife between his teeth — theatrical even in his paroxysm of undoubted courage — glared Jim Hooker. And Clarence Brant, with the whole responsibility of the field on his shoulders, even at that desperate moment, found himself recalling a vivid picture of the actor Hooker personating the character of "Red Dick" in "Rosalie, the Prairie Flower," as he had seen him in a California theatre five years before.

It wanted still an hour of the darkness that would probably close the fight of that day. Could he hold out, keeping his offensive position so long? A hasty council with his officers showed him that the weakness of their position had already infected them. They reminded him that his line of retreat was still open — that in the course of the night the enemy, although still pressing towards the division centre, might yet turn and outflank him — or that their strangely delayed supports might come up before morning. Brant's glass, however, remained fixed on the main column, still pursuing its way along the ridge. It struck him suddenly, however, that the steady current had stopped, spread out along the crest on both sides, and was

now at right angles with its previous course. There had been a check! The next moment the thunder of guns along the whole horizon, and the rising cloud of smoke, revealed a line of battle. The division centre was engaged. The opportunity he had longed for had come — the desperate chance to throw himself on their rear and cut his way through to the division — but it had come too late! He looked at his shattered ranks — scarce a regiment remained. Even as a demonstration, the attack would fail against the enemy's superior numbers. Nothing clearly was left to him now but to remain where he was — within supporting distance, and await the issue of the fight beyond. He was putting up his glass, when the dull boom of cannon in the extreme western limit of the horizon attracted his attention. By the still gleaming sky he could see a long gray line stealing up from the valley from the distant rear of the headquarters to join the main column. They were the missing supports! His heart leaped. He held the key of the mystery now. The one imperfect detail of the enemy's plan was before him. The supports, coming later from the west, had only seen the second signal from the window — when Miss Faulkner had replaced the vase — and had avoided his position. It was impossible to limit the effect of this blunder. If the young girl who had thus saved him had reached the division commander with his message in time, he might be forewarned, and even profit by it. His own position would be less precarious, as the enemy, already engaged in front, would be unable to recover their position in the rear and correct the blunder. The bulk of their column had already streamed past him. If defeated, there was always the danger that it might be rolled back upon him — but he conjectured that the division commander would attempt to prevent the junction of the supports with the main column by breaking between them, crowding them from the ridge, and joining him. As the last strag-

glers of the rear guard swept by, Brant's bugles were already recalling the skirmishers. He redoubled his pickets, and resolved to wait and watch.

And there was the more painful duty of looking after the wounded and the dead. The larger rooms of the headquarters had already been used as a hospital. Passing from cot to cot, recognizing in the faces now drawn with agony, or staring in vacant unconsciousness, the features that he had seen only a few hours before flushed with enthusiasm and excitement, something of his old doubting, questioning nature returned. Was there no way but this? How far was *he* — moving among them unscathed and uninjured — responsible?

And if not he — who then? His mind went back bitterly to the old days of the conspiracy — to the inception of that struggle which was bearing such ghastly fruit. He thought of his traitorous wife, until he felt his cheeks tingle, and he was fain to avert his eyes from those of his prostrate comrades, in a strange fear that, with the clairvoyance of dying men, they should read his secret.

It was past midnight when, without undressing, he threw himself upon his bed in the little convent-like cell to snatch a few moments of sleep. Its spotless, peaceful walls and draperies affected him strangely, as if he had brought into its immaculate serenity the sanguine stain of war. He was awakened suddenly from a deep slumber by an indefinite sense of alarm. His first thought was that he had been summoned to repel an attack. He sat up and listened; everything was silent except the measured tread of the sentry on the gravel walk below. But the door was open. He sprang to his feet and slipped into the gallery in time to see the tall figure of a woman glide before the last moonlit window at its farthest end. He could not see her face — but the characteristic turbaned head of the negro race was plainly visible.

He did not care to follow her or even to alarm the guard. If it were the spy or one of her emissaries, she was powerless now to do any harm, and under his late orders and the rigorous vigilance of his sentinels she could not leave the lines — or, indeed, the house. She probably knew this as well as he did; it was, therefore, no doubt only an accidental intrusion of one of the servants. He reëntered the room, and stood for a few moments by the window, looking over the moonlit ridge. The sounds of distant cannon had long since ceased. Wide awake, and refreshed by the keen morning air, which alone of all created things seemed to have shaken the burden of the dreadful yesterday from its dewy wings, he turned away and lit a candle on the table. As he was rebuckling his sword belt he saw a piece of paper lying on the foot of the bed from which he had just risen. Taking it to the candle, he read in a roughly scrawled hand: —

"You are asleep when you should be on the march. You have no time to lose. Before daybreak the supports of the column you have been foolishly resisting will be upon you. — From one who would save *you*, but hates your cause."

A smile of scorn passed his lips. The handwriting was unknown and evidently disguised. The purport of the message had not alarmed him; but suddenly a suspicion flashed upon him — that it came from Miss Faulkner! She had failed in her attempt to pass through the enemy's lines — or she had never tried to. She had deceived him — or had thought better of her chivalrous impulse, and now sought to mitigate her second treachery by this second warning. And he had let her messenger escape him!

He hurriedly descended the stairs. The sound of voices was approaching him. He halted, and recognized the faces of the brigade surgeon and one of his aides-de-camp.

"We were hesitating whether to disturb you, General,

but it may be an affair of some importance. Under your orders a negro woman was just now challenged stealing out of the lines. Attempting to escape, she was chased, there was a struggle and scramble over the wall, and she fell, striking her head. She was brought into the guard-house unconscious."

"Very good. I will see her," said Brant, with a feeling of relief.

"One moment, General. We thought you would perhaps prefer to see her alone," said the surgeon, "for when I endeavored to bring her to, and was sponging her face and head to discover her injuries, her color came off! She was a white woman — stained and disguised as a mulatto."

For an instant Brant's heart sank. It was Miss Faulkner.

"Did you recognize her?" he said, glancing from the one to the other. "Have you seen her here before?"

"No, sir," replied the aide-de-camp. "But she seemed to be quite a superior woman — a lady, I should say."

Brant breathed more freely.

"Where is she now?" he asked.

"In the guard-house. We thought it better not to bring her into hospital, among the men, until we had your orders."

"You have done well," returned Brant gravely. "And you will keep this to yourselves for the present; but see that she is brought here quietly and with as little publicity as possible. Put her in my room above, which I give up to her and any necessary attendant. But you will look carefully after her, doctor," — he turned to the surgeon, — "and when she recovers consciousness let me know."

He moved away. Although attaching little importance to the mysterious message, whether sent by Miss Faulkner or emanating from the stranger herself, which, he reasoned, was based only upon a knowledge of the original

plan of attack, he nevertheless quickly dispatched a small scouting party in the direction from which the attack might come, with orders to fall back and report at once. With a certain half irony of recollection he had selected Jim Hooker to accompany the party as a volunteer. This done, he returned to the gallery. The surgeon met him at the door.

"The indications of concussion are passing away," he said, "but she seems to be suffering from the exhaustion following some great nervous excitement. You may go in — she may rally from it at any moment."

With the artificial step and mysterious hush of the ordinary visitor to a sick bed, Brant entered the room. But some instinct greater than this common expression of humanity held him suddenly in awe. The room seemed no longer his — it had slipped back into that austere conventual privacy which had first impressed him. Yet he hesitated; another strange suggestion — it seemed almost a vague recollection — overcame him like some lingering perfume, far off and pathetic, in its dying familiarity. He turned his eyes almost timidly towards the bed. The coverlet was drawn up near the throat of the figure to replace the striped cotton gown stained with blood and dust, which had been hurriedly torn off and thrown on a chair. The pale face, cleansed of blood and disguising color, the long hair, still damp from the surgeon's sponge, lay rigidly back on the pillow. Suddenly this man of steady nerve uttered a faint cry, and, with a face as white as the upturned one before him, fell on his knees beside the bed. For the face that lay there was his wife's!

Yes, hers! But the beautiful hair that she had gloried in — the hair that in his youth he had thought had once fallen like a benediction on his shoulder — was streaked with gray along the blue-veined hollows of the temples; the orbits of those clear eyes, beneath their delicately

arched brows, were ringed with days of suffering; only the clear-cut profile, even to the delicate imperiousness of lips and nostril, was still there in all its beauty. The coverlet had slipped from her shoulder; its familiar cold contour startled him. He remembered how, in their early married days, he had felt the sanctity of that Diana-like revelation, and the still nymph-like austerity which clung to this strange, childless woman. He even fancied that he breathed again the subtle characteristic perfume of the laces, embroideries, and delicate enwrappings in her chamber at Robles. Perhaps it was the intensity of his gaze — perhaps it was the magnetism of his presence — but her lips parted with a half sigh, half moan. Her head, although her eyes were still closed, turned on the pillow instinctively towards him. He rose from his knees. Her eyes opened slowly. As the first glare of wonderment cleared from them, they met him — in the old antagonism of spirit. Yet her first gesture was a pathetic feminine movement with both hands to arrange her straggling hair. It brought her white fingers, cleaned of their disguising stains, as a sudden revelation to her of what had happened; she instantly slipped them back under the coverlet again. Brant did not speak, but with folded arms stood gazing upon her. It was her voice that first broke the silence.

"You have recognized me? Well, I suppose you know all," she said, with a weak half-defiance.

He bowed his head. He felt as yet he could not trust his voice, and envied her her own.

"I may sit up, may n't I?" She managed, by sheer force of will, to struggle to a sitting posture. Then, as the coverlet slipped from the bare shoulder, she said, as she drew it, with a shiver of disgust, around her again, —

"I forgot that you strip women, you Northern soldiers! But I forgot, too," she added, with a sarcastic smile, "that you are also my husband, and I am in your room."

The contemptuous significance of her speech dispelled the last lingering remnant of Brant's dream. In a voice as dry as her own, he said, —

"I am afraid you will now have to remember only that I am a Northern general, and you a Southern spy."

"So be it," she said gravely. Then impulsively, "But I have not spied on *you*."

Yet, the next moment, she bit her lips as if the expression had unwittingly escaped her; and with a reckless shrug of her shoulders she lay back on her pillow.

"It matters not," said Brant coldly. "You have used this house and those within it to forward your designs. It is not your fault that you found nothing in the dispatch-box you opened."

She stared at him quickly; then shrugged her shoulders again.

"I might have known she was false to me," she said bitterly, "and that you would wheedle her soul away as you have others. Well, she betrayed me! For what?"

A flush passed over Brant's face. But with an effort he contained himself.

"It was the flower that betrayed you! The flower whose red dust fell in the box when you opened it on the desk by the window in yonder room — the flower that stood in the window as a signal — the flower I myself removed, and so spoiled the miserable plot that your friends concocted."

A look of mingled terror and awe came into her face.

"*You* changed the signal!" she repeated dazedly; then, in a lower voice, "that accounts for it all!" But the next moment she turned again fiercely upon him. "And you mean to tell me that she did n't help you — that she did n't sell me — your wife — to you for — for what was it? A look — a kiss!"

"I mean to say that she did not know the signal was

changed, and that she herself restored it to its place. It is no fault of hers nor yours that I am not here a prisoner."

She passed her thin hand dazedly across her forehead.

"I see," she muttered. Then again bursting out passionately, she said — "Fool! you never would have been touched! Do you think that Lee would have gone for you, with higher game in your division commander? No! Those supports were a feint to draw him to your assistance while our main column broke his centre. Yes, you may stare at me, Clarence Brant. You are a good lawyer — they say a dashing fighter, too. I never thought you a coward, even in your irresolution; but you are fighting with men drilled in the art of war and strategy when you were a boy outcast on the plains." She stopped, closed her eyes, and then added, wearily — "But that was yesterday — to-day, who knows? All may be changed. The supports may still attack you. That was why I stopped to write you that note an hour ago, when I believed I should be leaving here forever. Yes, I did it!" she went on, with half-wearied, half-dogged determination. "You may as well know all. I had arranged to fly. Your pickets were to be drawn by friends of mine, who were waiting for me beyond your lines. Well, I lingered here when I saw you arrive — lingered to write you that note. And — I was too late!"

But Brant had been watching her varying expression, her kindling eye, her strange masculine grasp of military knowledge, her soldierly phraseology, all so new to her, that he scarcely heeded the feminine ending of her speech. It seemed to him no longer the Diana of his youthful fancy, but some Pallas Athene, who now looked up at him from the pillow. He had never before fully believed in her unselfish devotion to the cause until now, when it seemed to have almost unsexed her. In his wildest com-

prehension of her he had never dreamed her a Joan of Arc, and yet hers was the face which might have confronted him, exalted and inspired, on the battlefield itself. He recalled himself with an effort.

"I thank you for your would-be warning," he said more gently, if not so tenderly, "and God knows I wish your flight had been successful. But even your warning is unnecessary, for the supports had already come up; they had followed the second signal, and diverged to engage our division on the left, leaving me alone. And their ruse of drawing our commander to assist me would not have been successful, as I had suspected it, and sent a message to him that I wanted no help."

It was the truth; it was the sole purport of the note he had sent through Miss Faulkner. He would not have disclosed his sacrifice; but so great was the strange domination of this woman still over him, that he felt compelled to assert his superiority. She fixed her eyes upon him.

"And Miss Faulkner took your message?" she said slowly. "Don't deny it! No one else could have passed through our lines; and you gave her a safe conduct through yours. Yes, I might have known it. And this was the creature they sent me for an ally and confidant!"

For an instant Brant felt the sting of this enforced contrast between the two women. But he only said, —

"You forget that I did not know you were the spy, nor do I believe that she suspected you were my wife."

"Why should she?" she said almost fiercely. "I am known among these people only by the name of Benham — my maiden name. Yes! — you can take me out, and shoot me under that name, without disgracing yours. Nobody will know that the Southern spy was the wife of the Northern general! You see, I have thought even of that!"

"And thinking of that," said Brant slowly, "you have

put yourself — I will not say in my power, for you are in the power of any man in this camp who may know you, or even hear you speak. Well, let us understand each other plainly. I do not know how great a sacrifice your devotion to your cause demands of you; I do know what it seems to demand of me. Hear me, then! I will do my best to protect you, and get you safely away from here; but, failing that, I tell you plainly that I shall blow out your brains and my own together."

She knew that he would do it. Yet her eyes suddenly beamed with a new and awakening light; she put back her hair again, and half raised herself upon the pillow, to gaze at his dark, set face.

"And as I shall let no other life but ours be periled in this affair," he went on quietly, "and will accompany you myself in some disguise beyond the lines, we will together take the risks — or the bullets of the sentries that may save us both all further trouble. An hour or two more will settle that. Until then your weak condition will excuse you from any disturbance or intrusion here. The mulatto woman you have sometimes personated may be still in this house; I will appoint her to attend you. I suppose you can trust her, for you must personate her again, and escape in her clothes, while she takes your place in this room as my prisoner."

"Clarence!"

Her voice had changed suddenly; it was no longer bitter and stridulous, but low and thrilling as he had heard her call to him that night in the patio of Robles. He turned quickly. She was leaning from the bed — her thin, white hands stretched appealingly towards him.

"Let us go together, Clarence," she said eagerly. "Let us leave this horrible place — these wicked, cruel people — forever. Come with me! Come with me to my people — to my own faith — to my own house — which shall be

yours! Come with me to defend it with your good sword, Clarence, against those vile invaders with whom you have nothing in common, and who are the dirt under your feet. Yes, yes! I know it! — I have done you wrong — I have lied to you when I spoke against your skill and power. You are a hero — a born leader of men! I know it! Have I not heard it from the men who have fought against you, and yet admired and understood you, ay, better than your own? — gallant men, Clarence, soldiers bred who did not know what you were to me nor how proud I was of you even while I hated you? Come with me! Think what we would do together — with one faith — one cause — one ambition! Think, Clarence, there is no limit you might not attain! We are no niggards of our rewards and honors — we have no hireling votes to truckle to — we know our friends! Even I — Clarence — I" — there was a strange pathos in the sudden humility that seemed to overcome her — "I have had my reward and known my power. I have been sent abroad, in the confidence of the highest — to the highest. Don't turn from me. I am offering you no bribe, Clarence, only your deserts. Come with me. Leave these curs behind, and live the hero that you are!"

He turned his blazing eyes upon her.

"If you were a man" — he began passionately, then stopped.

"No! I am only a woman and must fight in a woman's way," she interrupted bitterly. "Yes! I intreat, I implore, I wheedle, I flatter, I fawn, I lie! I creep where you stand upright, and pass through doors to which you would not bow. You wear your blazon of honor on your shoulder; I hide mine in a slave's gown. And yet I have worked and striven and suffered! Listen, Clarence," — her voice again sank to its appealing minor, — "I know what you men call 'honor,' that which makes you cling

to a merely spoken word, or an empty oath. Well, let that pass! I am weary; I have done my share of this work, you have done yours. Let us both fly; let us leave the fight to those who shall come after us, and let us go together to some distant land where the sounds of these guns or the blood of our brothers no longer cry out to us for vengeance! There are those living here — I have met them, Clarence," she went on hurriedly, "who think it wrong to lift up fratricidal hands in the struggle, yet who cannot live under the Northern yoke. They are," her voice hesitated, "good men and women — they are respected — they are" —

"Recreants and slaves, before whom you, spy as you are, stand a queen!" broke in Brant passionately. He stopped and turned towards the window. After a pause he came back again towards the bed — paused again and then said in a lower voice — "Four years ago, Alice, in the patio of our house at Robles, I might have listened to this proposal, and — I tremble to think — I might have accepted it! I loved you; I was as weak, as selfish, as unreflecting, my life was as purposeless — but for you — as the creatures you speak of. But give me now, at least, the credit of a devotion to my cause equal to your own — a credit which I have never denied you! For the night that you left me, I awoke to a sense of my own worthlessness and degradation — perhaps I have even to thank you for that awakening — and I realized the bitter truth. But that night I found my true vocation — my purpose, my manhood" —

A bitter laugh came from the pillow on which she had languidly thrown herself.

"I believe I left you with Mrs. Hooker — spare me the details."

The blood rushed to Brant's face and then receded as suddenly.

"You left me with Captain Pinckney, who had tempted you, and whom I killed!" he said furiously.

They were both staring savagely at each other. Suddenly he said, "Hush!" and sprang towards the door, as the sound of hurried footsteps echoed along the passage. But he was too late; it was thrown open to the officer of the guard, who appeared, standing on the threshold.

"Two Confederate officers arrested hovering around our pickets. They demand to see you."

Before Brant could interpose, two men in riding cloaks of Confederate gray stepped into the room with a jaunty and self-confident air.

"Not *demand*, General," said the foremost, a tall, distinguished-looking man, lifting his hand with a graceful deprecating air. "In fact, too sorry to bother you with an affair of no importance except to ourselves. A bit of after-dinner bravado brought us in contact with your pickets, and, of course, we had to take the consequences. Served us right, and we were lucky not to have got a bullet through us. Gad! I 'm afraid my men would have been less discreet! I am Colonel Lagrange, of the 5th Tennessee; my young friend here is Captain Faulkner, of the 1st Kentucky. Some excuse for a youngster like him — none for me! I" —

He stopped, for his eyes suddenly fell upon the bed and its occupant. Both he and his companion started. But to the natural, unaffected dismay of a gentleman who had unwittingly intruded upon a lady's bed-chamber, Brant's quick eye saw a more disastrous concern superadded. Colonel Lagrange was quick to recover himself, as they both removed their caps.

"A thousand pardons," he said, hurriedly stepping backwards to the door. "But I hardly need say to a fellow-officer, General, that we had no idea of making so gross an intrusion! We heard some cock-and-bull story of your

being occupied — cross-questioning an escaped or escaping nigger — or we should never have forced ourselves upon you."

Brant glanced quickly at his wife. Her face had apparently become rigid on the entrance of the two men; her eyes were coldly fixed upon the ceiling. He bowed formally, and, with a wave of his hand towards the door, said, —

"I will hear your story below, gentlemen."

He followed them from the room, stopped to quietly turn the key in the lock, and then motioned them to precede him down the staircase.

CHAPTER VII

Not a word was exchanged till they had reached the lower landing and Brant's private room. Dismissing his subaltern and orderly with a sign, Brant turned towards his prisoners. The jaunty ease, but not the self-possession, had gone from Lagrange's face; the eyes of Captain Faulkner were fixed on his older companion with a half-humorous look of perplexity.

"I am afraid I can only repeat, General, that our foolhardy freak has put us in collision with your sentries," said Lagrange, with a slight hauteur, that replaced his former jauntiness; "and we were very properly made prisoners. If you will accept my parole, I have no doubt our commander will proceed to exchange a couple of gallant fellows of yours, whom I have had the honor of meeting within our own lines, and whom you must miss probably more than I fear our superiors miss us."

"Whatever brought you here, gentlemen," said Brant dryly, "I am glad, for your sakes, that you are in uniform, although it does not, unfortunately, relieve me of an unpleasant duty."

"I don't think I understand you," returned Lagrange coldly.

"If you had not been in uniform, you would probably have been shot down as spies, without the trouble of capture," said Brant quietly.

"Do you mean to imply, sir," — began Lagrange sternly.

"I mean to say that the existence of a Confederate spy between this camp and the division headquarters is sufficiently well known to us to justify the strongest action."

"And pray, how can that affect us?" said Lagrange haughtily.

"I need not inform so old a soldier as Colonel Lagrange that the aiding, abetting, and even receiving information from a spy or traitor within one's lines is an equally dangerous service."

"Perhaps you would like to satisfy yourself, General," said Colonel Lagrange, with an ironical laugh. "Pray do not hesitate on account of our uniform. Search us if you like."

"Not on entering my lines, Colonel," replied Brant, with quiet significance.

Lagrange's cheek flushed. But he recovered himself quickly, and with a formal bow said, —

"You will, then, perhaps, let us know your pleasure?"

"My *duty*, Colonel, is to keep you both close prisoners here until I have an opportunity to forward you to the division commander, with a report of the circumstances of your arrest. That I propose to do. How soon I may have that opportunity, or if I am ever to have it," continued Brant, fixing his clear eyes significantly on Lagrange, "depends upon the chances of war, which you probably understand as well as I do."

"We should never think of making any calculation on the action of an officer of such infinite resources as General Brant," said Lagrange ironically.

"You will, no doubt, have an opportunity of stating your own case to the division commander," continued Brant, with an unmoved face. "And," he continued, turning for the first time to Captain Faulkner, "when you tell the commander what I believe to be the fact — from your name and resemblance — that you are a relation of the young lady who for the last three weeks has been an inmate of this house under a pass from Washington, you will, I have no doubt, favorably explain your own propinquity to my lines."

"My sister Tilly!" said the young officer impulsively. "But she is no longer here. She passed through the lines back to Washington yesterday. No," he added, with a light laugh, "I 'm afraid that excuse won't count for to-day."

A sudden frown upon the face of the elder officer, added to the perfect ingenuousness of Faulkner's speech, satisfied Brant that he had not only elicited the truth, but that Miss Faulkner had been successful. But he was sincere in his suggestion that her relationship to the young officer would incline the division commander to look leniently upon his fault, for he was conscious of a singular satisfaction in thus being able to serve her. Of the real object of the two men before him he had no doubt. They were "the friends" of his wife, who were waiting for her outside the lines! Chance alone had saved her from being arrested with them, with the consequent exposure of her treachery before his own men, who, as yet, had no proof of her guilt, nor any suspicion of her actual identity. Meanwhile his own chance of conveying her with safety beyond his lines was not affected by the incident; the prisoners dare not reveal what they knew of her, and it was with a grim triumph that he thought of compassing her escape without their aid. Nothing of this, however, was visible in his face, which the younger man watched with a kind of boyish curiosity, while Colonel Lagrange regarded the ceiling with a politely repressed yawn. "I regret," concluded Brant, as he summoned the officer of the guard, "that I shall have to deprive you of each other's company during the time you are here; but I shall see that you, separately, want for nothing in your confinement."

"If this is with a view to separate interrogatory, General, I can retire now," said Lagrange, rising, with ironical politeness.

"I believe I have all the information I require," re-

turned Brant, with undisturbed composure. Giving the necessary orders to his subaltern, he acknowledged with equal calm the formal salutes of the two prisoners as they were led away, and returned quickly to his bedroom above. He paused instinctively for a moment before the closed door, and listened. There was no sound from within. He unlocked the door, and opened it.

So quiet was the interior that for an instant, without glancing at the bed, he cast a quick look at the window, which, till then, he had forgotten, and which he remembered gave upon the veranda roof. But it was still closed, and as he approached the bed, he saw his wife still lying there, in the attitude in which he had left her. But her eyes were ringed, and slightly filmed, as if with recent tears.

It was perhaps this circumstance that softened his voice, still harsh with command, as he said, —

"I suppose you knew those two men?"

"Yes."

"And that I have put it out of their power to help you?"

"I do."

There was something so strangely submissive in her voice that he again looked suspiciously at her. But he was shocked to see that she was quite pale now, and that the fire had gone out of her dark eyes.

"Then I may tell you what is my plan to save you. But, first, you must find this mulatto woman who has acted as your double."

"She is here."

"Here?"

"Yes."

"How do you know it?" he asked, in quick suspicion.

"She was not to leave this place until she knew I was safe within our lines. I have some friends who are faith-

ful to me." After a pause she added, "She has been here already."

He looked at her, startled. "Impossible — I" —

"You locked the door. Yes! but she has a second key. And even if she had not, there is another entrance from that closet. You do not know this house: you have been here two weeks; I spent two years of my life, as a girl, in this room."

An indescribable sensation came over him; he remembered how he had felt when he first occupied it; this was followed by a keen sense of shame on reflecting that he had been, ever since, but a helpless puppet in the power of his enemies, and that she could have escaped if she would, even now.

"Perhaps," he said grimly, "you have already arranged your plans?"

She looked at him with a singular reproachfulness even in her submission.

"I have only told her to be ready to change clothes with me and help me color my face and hands at the time appointed. I have left the rest to you."

"Then this is my plan. I have changed only a detail. You and she must both leave this house at the same time, by different exits, but one of them must be private — and unknown to my men. Do you know of such a one?"

"Yes," she said, "in the rear of the negro quarters."

"Good," he replied, "that will be your way out. She will leave here, publicly, through the parade, armed with a pass from me. She will be overhauled and challenged by the first sentry near the guard-house, below the wall. She will be subjected to some delay and scrutiny, which she will, however, be able to pass better than you would. This will create the momentary diversion that we require. In the mean time, you will have left the house by the rear, and you will then keep in the shadow of the hedge until

you can drop down along the Run, where it empties into the swamp. That," he continued, fixing his keen eyes upon her, "is the one weak point in the position of this place that is neither overlooked nor defended. But perhaps," he added again grimly, "you already know it."

"It is the marsh where the flowers grow, near the path where you met Miss Faulkner. I had crossed the marsh to give her a letter," she said slowly.

A bitter smile came over Brant's face, but passed as quickly.

"Enough," he said quietly, "I will meet you beside the Run, and cross the marsh with you until you are within hailing distance of your lines. I will be in plain clothes, Alice," he went on slowly, "for it will not be the commander of this force who accompanies you, but your husband, and, without disgracing his uniform, he will drop to your level; for the instant he passes his own lines, in disguise, he will become, like you, a spy, and amenable to its penalties."

Her eyes seemed suddenly to leap up to his with that strange look of awakening and enthusiasm which he had noted before. And in its complete prepossession of all her instincts she rose from the bed, unheeding her bared arms and shoulders and loosened hair, and stood upright before him. For an instant husband and wife regarded each other as unreservedly as in their own chamber at Robles.

"When shall I go?"

He glanced through the window already growing lighter with the coming dawn. The relief would pass in a few moments; the time seemed propitious.

"At once," he said. "I will send Rose to you."

But his wife had already passed into the closet, and was tapping upon some inner door. He heard the sound of hinges turning and the rustling of garments. She reappeared, holding the curtains of the closet together with her hand, and said, —

"Go! When she comes to your office for the pass, you will know that I have gone."

He turned away.

"Stop!" she said faintly.

He turned back. Her expression had again changed. Her face was deadly pale; a strange tremor seemed to have taken possession of her. Her hands dropped from the curtain. Her beautiful arms moved slightly forward; it seemed to him that she would in the next moment have extended them towards him. But even then she said hurriedly, "Go! Go!" and slipped again behind the curtains.

He quickly descended the stairs as the sound of trampling feet on the road, and the hurried word of command, announced the return of the scouting party. The officer had little report to make beyond the fact that a morning mist, creeping along the valley, prevented any further observation, and bade fair to interrupt their own communications with the camp. Everything was quiet in the west, although the enemy's lines along the ridge seemed to have receded.

Brant had listened impatiently, for a new idea had seized him. Hooker was of the party, and was the one man in whom he could partly confide, and obtain a disguise. He at once made his way to the commissary wagons — one of which he knew Hooker used as a tent. Hastily telling him that he wished to visit the pickets without recognition, he induced him to lend him his slouched hat and frock coat, leaving with him his own distinguishing tunic, hat, and sword. He resisted the belt and pistols which Hooker would have forced upon him. As he left the wagon he was amusedly conscious that his old companion was characteristically examining the garments he had left behind with mingled admiration and envy. But he did not know, as he slipped out of the

camp, that Mr. Hooker was quietly trying them on, before a broken mirror in the wagon-head!

The gray light of that summer morning was already so strong that, to avoid detection, he quickly dropped into the shadow of the gully that sloped towards the Run. The hot mist which the scouts had seen was now lying like a tranquil sea between him and the pickets of the enemy's rear-guard, which it seemed to submerge, and was clinging in moist tenuous swathes — like drawn-out cotton wool — along the ridge, half obliterating its face. From the valley in the rear it was already stealing in a thin white line up the slope like the advance of a ghostly column, with a stealthiness that, in spite of himself, touched him with superstitious significance. A warm perfume, languid and treacherous — as from the swamp magnolia — seemed to rise from the half-hidden marsh. An ominous silence, that appeared to be a part of this veiling of all things under the clear opal-tinted sky above, was so little like the hush of rest and peace, that he half yearned for the outburst of musketry and tumult of attack that might dispel it. All that he had ever heard or dreamed of the insidious South, with its languid subtleties of climate and of race, seemed to encompass him here.

But the next moment he saw the figure he was waiting for stealing towards him from the shadow of the gulley beneath the negro quarters.

Even in that uncertain light there was no mistaking the tall figure, the gaudily striped clinging gown and turbaned head. And then a strange revulsion of feeling, quite characteristic of the emotional side of his singular temperament, overcame him. He was taking leave of his wife — the dream of his youth — perhaps forever! It should be no parting in anger as at Robles; it should be with a tenderness that would blot out their past in their separate memories — God knows! it might even be that a parting

at that moment was a joining of them in eternity. In his momentary exaltation it even struck him that it was a duty, no less sacred, no less unselfish than the one to which he had devoted his life. The light was growing stronger; he could hear voices in the nearest picket line, and the sound of a cough in the invading mist. He made a hurried sign to the on-coming figure to follow him, ran ahead, and halted at last in the cover of a hackmatack bush. Still gazing forward over the marsh, he stealthily held out his hand behind him as the rustling skirt came nearer. At last his hand was touched — but even at that touch he started and turned quickly.

It was not his wife, but Rose! — her mulatto double! Her face was rigid with fright, her beady eyes staring in their china sockets, her white teeth chattering. Yet she would have spoken.

"Hush!" he said, clutching her hand, in a fierce whisper. "Not a word!"

She was holding something white in her fingers; he snatched it quickly. It was a note from his wife — not in the disguised hand of her first warning, but in one that he remembered as if it were a voice from their past.

"Forgive me for disobeying you to save you from capture, disgrace, or death — which would have come to you where you were going! I have taken Rose's pass. You need not fear that your honor will suffer by it, for if I am stopped I shall confess that I took it from her. Think no more of me, Clarence, but only of yourself. You are in danger."

He crushed the letter in his hand.

"Tell me," he said in a fierce whisper, seizing her arm, "and speak low. When did you leave her?"

"Sho'ly just now!" gasped the frightened woman.

He flung her aside. There might be still time to overtake and save her before she reached the picket lines. He

ran up the gully, and out on to the slope towards the first guard-post. But a familiar challenge reached his ear, and his heart stopped beating.

"Who goes there?"

There was a pause, a rattle of arms — voices — another pause — and Brant stood breathlessly listening. Then the voice rose again slowly and clearly: "Pass the mulatto woman!"

Thank God! she was saved! But the thought had scarcely crossed his mind before it seemed to him that a blinding crackle of sparks burst out along the whole slope below the wall, a characteristic yell which he knew too well rang in his ears, and an undulating line of dusty figures came leaping like gray wolves out of the mist upon his pickets. He heard the shouts of his men falling back as they fired; the harsh commands of a few officers hurrying to their posts, and knew that he had been hopelessly surprised and surrounded!

He ran forward among his disorganized men. To his consternation no one seemed to heed him! Then the remembrance of his disguise flashed upon him. But he had only time to throw away his hat and snatch a sword from a falling lieutenant, before a scorching flash seemed to pass before his eyes and burn through his hair, and he dropped like a log beside his subaltern.

. . . . . .

An aching under the bandage around his head where a spent bullet had grazed his scalp, and the sound of impossible voices in his ears were all he knew as he struggled slowly back to consciousness again. Even then it still seemed a delusion, — for he was lying on a cot in his own hospital, yet with officers of the division staff around him, and the division commander himself standing by his side, and regarding him with an air of grave but not unkindly concern. But the wounded man felt instinctively that it

was not the effect of his physical condition, and a sense of shame came suddenly over him, which was not dissipated by his superior's words. For, motioning the others aside, the major-general leaned over his cot, and said, —

"Until a few moments ago, the report was that you had been captured in the first rush of the rear-guard which we were rolling up for your attack, and when you were picked up, just now, in plain clothes on the slope, you were not recognized. The one thing seemed to be as improbable as the other," he added significantly.

The miserable truth flashed across Brant's mind. Hooker must have been captured in his clothes — perhaps in some extravagant sally — and had not been recognized in the confusion by his own officers. Nevertheless, he raised his eyes to his superior.

"You got my note?"

The general's brow darkened.

"Yes," he said slowly, "but finding you thus unprepared — I had been thinking just now that you had been deceived by that woman — or by others — and that it was a clumsy forgery." He stopped, and seeing the hopeless bewilderment in the face of the wounded man, added more kindly: "But we will not talk of that in your present condition. The doctor says a few hours will put you straight again. Get strong, for I want you to lose no time — for your own sake — to report yourself at Washington."

"Report myself — at Washington!" repeated Brant slowly.

"That was last night's order," said the commander, with military curtness. Then he burst out: "I don't understand it, Brant! I believe you have been misunderstood, misrepresented, perhaps maligned — and I shall make it *my* business to see the thing through — but those are the Department orders. And for the present — I am sorry to say you are relieved of your command."

He turned away, and Brant closed his eyes. With them it seemed to him that he closed his career. No one would ever understand his explanation — even had he been tempted to give one, and he knew he never would. Everything was over now! Even this wretched bullet had not struck him fairly, and culminated his fate as it might! For an instant, he recalled his wife's last offer to fly with him beyond the seas — beyond this cruel injustice — but even as he recalled it, he knew that flight meant the worst of all — a half-confession! But she had escaped! Thank God for that! Again and again in his hopeless perplexity this comfort returned to him, — he had saved her; he had done his duty. And harping upon this in his strange fatalism, it at last seemed to him that this was for what he had lived — for what he had suffered — for what he had fitly ended his career. Perhaps it was left for him now to pass his remaining years in forgotten exile — even as his father had — his father! — his breath came quickly at the thought — God knows! perhaps as wrongfully accused! It may have been a Providence that she had borne him no child, to whom this dreadful heritage could be again transmitted.

There was something of this strange and fateful resignation in his face, a few hours later, when he was able to be helped again into the saddle. But he could see in the eyes of the few comrades who commiseratingly took leave of him a vague, half-repressed awe of some indefinite weakness in the man, that mingled with their heartfelt parting with a gallant soldier. Yet even this touched him no longer. He cast a glance at the house and the room where he had parted from her, at the slope from which she had passed — and rode away.

And then, as his figure disappeared down the road, the restrained commentary of wonder, surmise, and criticism broke out: —

"It must have been something mighty bad, for the old

man, who swears by him, looked rather troubled. And it was deuced queer, you know, this changing clothes with somebody, just before this surprise!"

"Nonsense! It 's something away back of that! Did n't you hear the old man say that the orders for him to report himself came from Washington *last night?* No!" — the speaker lowered his voice — "Strangeways says that he had regularly sold himself out to one of them d—d secesh woman spies! It 's the old Marc Antony business over again!"

"Now I think of it," said a younger subaltern, "he did seem mightily taken with one of those quadroons or mulattoes he issued orders against. I suppose that was a blind for us! I remember the first day he saw her; he was regularly keen to know all about her."

Major Curtis gave a short laugh.

"That mulatto, Martin, was a white woman, burnt-corked! She was trying to get through the lines last night, and fell off a wall or got a knock on the head from a sentry's carbine. When she was brought in, Doctor Simmons set to washing the blood off her face; the cork came off and the whole thing came out. Brant hushed it up — and the woman, too, — in his own quarters! It 's supposed now that she got away somehow in the rush!"

"It goes further back than that, gentlemen," said the adjutant authoritatively. "They say his wife was a howling secessionist, four years ago, in California, was mixed up in a conspiracy, and he had to leave on account of it. Look how thick he and that Miss Faulkner became, before he helped *her* off!"

"That 's your jealousy, Tommy; she knew he was, by all odds, the biggest man here, and a good deal more, too, and you had no show!"

In the laugh that followed, it would seem that Brant's eulogy had been spoken and forgotten. But as Lieutenant

Martin was turning away, a lingering corporal touched his cap.

"You were speaking of those prowling mulattoes, sir. You know the general passed one out this morning."

"So I have heard."

"I reckon she did n't get very far. It was just at the time that we were driven in by their first fire, and I think she got her share of it, too. Do you mind walking this way, sir?"

The lieutenant did not mind, although he rather languidly followed. When they had reached the top of the gully, the corporal pointed to what seemed to be a bit of striped calico hanging on a thorn bush in the ravine.

"That 's her," said the corporal. "I know the dress; I was on guard when she was passed. The searchers, who were picking up our men, have n't got to her yet; but she ain't moved or stirred these two hours. Would you like to go down and see her?"

The lieutenant hesitated. He was young, and slightly fastidious as to unnecessary unpleasantness. He believed he would wait until the searchers brought her up, when the corporal might call him.

The mist came up gloriously from the swamp like a golden halo. And as Clarence Brant, already forgotten, rode moodily through it towards Washington, hugging to his heart the solitary comfort of his great sacrifice, his wife, Alice Brant, for whom he had made it, was lying in the ravine, dead and uncared for. Perhaps it was part of the inconsistency of her sex that she was pierced with the bullets of those she had loved, and was wearing the garments of the race that she had wronged.

PART III

CHAPTER I

It was sunset of a hot day at Washington. Even at that hour the broad avenues, which diverged from the Capitol like the rays of another sun, were fierce and glittering. The sterile distances between glowed more cruelly than ever, and pedestrians, keeping in the scant shade, hesitated on the curbstones before plunging into the Sahara-like waste of crossings. The city seemed deserted. Even that vast army of contractors, speculators, place-hunters, and lobbyists, which hung on the heels of the other army, and had turned this pacific camp of the nation into a battlefield of ignoble conflict and contention — more disastrous than the one to the South — had slunk into their holes in hotel back bedrooms, in shady bar-rooms, or in the negro quarters of Georgetown, as if the majestic, white-robed Goddess enthroned upon the dome of the Capitol had at last descended among them and was smiting to right and left with the flat and flash of her insufferable sword.

Into this stifling atmosphere of greed and corruption Clarence Brant stepped from the shadow of the War Department. For the last three weeks he had haunted its ante-rooms and audience-chambers, in the vain hope of righting himself before his superiors, who were content, without formulating charges against him, to keep him in this disgrace of inaction and the anxiety of suspense. Unable to ascertain the details of the accusation, and conscious of his own secret, he was debarred the last resort of demanding a court-martial, which he knew could only exonerate

him by the exposure of the guilt of his wife, whom he still hoped had safely escaped. His division commander, in active operations in the field, had no time to help him at Washington. Elbowed aside by greedy contractors, forestalled by selfish politicians, and disdaining the ordinary method of influence, he had no friend to turn to. In his few years of campaigning he had lost his instinct of diplomacy, without acquiring a soldier's bluntness.

The nearly level rays of the sun forced him at last to turn aside into one of the openings of a large building — a famous caravansary of that hotel-haunted capital, and he presently found himself in the luxurious bar-room, fragrant with mint, and cool with ice-slabs piled symmetrically on its marble counters. A few groups of men were seeking coolness at small tables with glasses before them and palm-leaf fans in their hands, but a larger and noisier assemblage was collected before the bar, where a man, collarless and in his shirt-sleeves, with his back to the counter, was pretentiously addressing them. Brant, who had moodily dropped into a chair in the corner, after ordering a cooling drink as an excuse for his temporary refuge from the stifling street, half-regretted his enforced participation in their conviviality. But a sudden lowering of the speaker's voice into a note of gloomy significance seemed familiar to him. He glanced at him quickly, from the shadow of his corner. He was not mistaken — it was Jim Hooker!

For the first time in his life, Brant wished to evade him. In the days of his own prosperity his heart had always gone out towards this old companion of his boyhood; in his present humiliation his presence jarred upon him. He would have slipped away, but to do so he would have had to pass before the counter again, and Hooker, with the self-consciousness of a story-teller, had an eye on his audience. Brant, with a palm-leaf fan before his face, was obliged to listen.

"Yes, gentlemen," said Hooker, examining his glass dramatically, "when a man 's been cooped up in a Rebel prison, with a death line before him that he 's obliged to cross every time he wants a square drink, it seems sort of like a dream of his boyhood to be standin' here comf'ble before his liquor, alongside o' white men once more. And when he knows he 's bin put to all that trouble jest to save the reputation of another man, and the secrets of a few high and mighty ones, it 's almost enough to make his liquor go agin him." He stopped theatrically, seemed to choke emotionally over his brandy squash, but with a pause of dramatic determination finally dashed it down. "No, gentlemen," he continued gloomily, "I don't say what I 'm back in Washington *for* — I don't say what I 've been sayin' to myself when I 've bin picking the weevils outer my biscuits in Libby Prison — but ef you don't see some pretty big men in the War Department obliged to climb down in the next few days, my name ain't Jim Hooker, of Hooker, Meacham & Co., Army Beef Contractors, and the man who saved the fight at Gray Oaks!"

The smile of satisfaction that went around his audience — an audience quick to seize the weakness of any performance — might have startled a vanity less oblivious than Hooker's; but it only aroused Brant's indignation and pity, and made his position still more intolerable. But Hooker, scornfully expectorating a thin stream of tobacco juice against the spittoon, remained for an instant gloomily silent.

"Tell us about the fight again," said a smiling auditor.

Hooker looked around the room with a certain dark suspiciousness, and then, in an affected lower voice, which his theatrical experience made perfectly audible, went on: —

"It ain't much to speak of, and if it was n't for the principle of the thing, I would n't be talking. A man who 's seen Injin fightin' don't go much on this here West Point fightin' by rule-of-three — but that ain't here or

there! Well, I 'd bin out a-scoutin' — just to help the boys along, and I was sittin' in my wagon about daybreak, when along comes a brigadier-general, and he looks into the wagon flap. I oughter tell you first, gentlemen, that every minute he was expecting an attack — but he did n't let on a hint of it to me. 'How are you, Jim?' said he. 'How are you, General?' said I. 'Would you mind lendin' me your coat and hat?' says he. 'I 've got a little game here with our pickets, and I don't want to be recognized.' 'Anything to oblige, General,' said I, and with that I strips off my coat and hat, and he peels and puts them on. 'Nearly the same figure, Jim,' he says, lookin' at me, 'suppose you try on my things and see.' With that he hands me his coat — full uniform, by G—d! — with the little gold cords and laces and the epaulettes with a star, and I puts it on — quite innocent-like. And then he says, handin' me his sword and belt, 'Same inches round the waist, I reckon,' and I puts that on, too. 'You may as well keep 'em on till I come back,' says he, 'for it 's mighty damp and malarious at this time around the swamp.' And with that he lights out. Well, gentlemen, I had n't sat there five minutes before Bang! bang! rattle! rattle! kershiz! and I hears a yell. I steps out of the wagon; everything 's quite dark, but the rattle goes on. Then along trots an orderly, leadin' a horse. 'Mount, General,' he says; 'we 're attacked — the rear-guard 's on us!'"

He paused, looked round his audience, and then, in a lower voice, said darkly, —

"I ain't a fool, an' in that minute a man's brain works at high pressure, and I saw it all! I saw the little game of the brigadier — to skunk away in my clothes and leave me to be captured in his. But I ain't a dog neither, and I mounted that horse, gentlemen, and lit out to where the men were formin'! I did n't dare to speak, lest they should know me, but I waved my sword, and by G—d!

they followed me! And the next minute we was in the thick of it. I had my hat as full of holes as that ice strainer; I had a dozen bullets through my coat, the fringe of my epaulettes was shot away, but I kept the boys at their work — and we stopped 'em! Stopped 'em, gentlemen, until we heard the bugles of the rest of our division, that all this time had been rolling that blasted rear-guard over on us! And it saved the fight; but the next minute the Johnny Rebs made a last dash and cut me off — and there I was — by G—d, a prisoner! Me that had saved the fight!"

A ripple of ironical applause went round as Hooker gloomily drained his glass, and then held up his hand in scornful deprecation.

"I said I was a prisoner, gentlemen," he went on bitterly; "but that ain't all! I asked to see Johnston, told him what I had done, and demanded to be exchanged for a general officer. He said, 'You be d—d.' I then sent word to the division commander-in-chief, and told him how I had saved Gray Oaks when his brigadier ran away, and he said, 'You be d—d.' I've bin 'You be d—d' from the lowest non-com. to the commander-in-chief, and when I was at last exchanged, I was exchanged, gentlemen, for two mules and a broken wagon. But I'm here, gentlemen — as I was thar!"

"Why don't you see the President about it?" asked a bystander, in affected commiseration.

Mr. Hooker stared contemptuously at the suggestion, and expectorated his scornful dissent.

"Not much!" he said. "But I'm going to see the man that carries him and his cabinet in his breeches pocket — Senator Boompointer."

"Boompointer's a big man," continued his auditor doubtfully. "Do you know him?"

"Know him?" Mr. Hooker laughed a bitter, sardonic

laugh. "Well, gentlemen, I ain't the kind o' man to go in for family influence; but," he added, with gloomy elevation, "considering he 's an intimate relation of mine, *by marriage*, I should say I did."

Brant heard no more; the facing around of his old companion towards the bar gave him that opportunity of escaping he had been waiting for. The defection of Hooker and his peculiar inventions were too characteristic of him to excite surprise, and, although they no longer awakened his good-humored tolerance, they were powerless to affect him in his greater trouble. Only one thing he learned — that Hooker knew nothing of his wife being in camp as a spy — the incident would have been too tempting to have escaped his dramatic embellishment. And the allusion to Senator Boompointer, monstrous as it seemed in Hooker's mouth, gave him a grim temptation. He had heard of Boompointer's wonderful power; he believed that Susy would and could help him — Clarence — whether she did or did not help Hooker. But the next moment he dismissed the idea, with a flushing cheek. How low had he already sunk, even to think of it!

It had been once or twice in his mind to seek the President, and, under a promise of secrecy, reveal a part of his story. He had heard many anecdotes of his goodness of heart and generous tolerance of all things, but with this was joined — so said contemporaneous history — a flippancy of speech and a brutality of directness from which Clarence's sensibility shrank. Would he see anything in his wife but a common spy on his army? would he see anything in him but the weak victim, like many others, of a scheming woman? Stories were current in camp and Congress of the way that this grim humorist had, with an apposite anecdote or a rugged illustration, brushed away the most delicate sentiment or the subtlest poetry, even as he had exposed the sham of Puritanic morality or of Epicurean

ethics. Brant had even solicited an audience, but had retired awkwardly, and with his confidence unspoken, before the dark, humorous eyes, that seemed almost too tolerant of his grievance. He had been to levees, and his heart had sunk equally before the vulgar crowd who seemed to regard this man as their own buffoon, and the pompousness of position, learning, and dignity which he seemed to delight to shake and disturb.

One afternoon, a few days later, in sheer listlessness of purpose, he found himself again at the White House. The President was giving audience to a deputation of fanatics, who, with a pathetic simplicity almost equal to his own pathetic tolerance, were urging upon this ruler of millions the policy of an insignificant score, and Brant listened to his patient, practical response of facts and logic, clothed in simple but sinewy English, up to the inevitable climax of humorous illustration, which the young brigadier could now see was necessary to relieve the grimness of his refusal. For the first time Brant felt the courage to address him, and resolved to wait until the deputation retired. As they left the gallery he lingered in the ante-room for the President to appear. But, as he did not come, afraid of losing his chances, he returned to the gallery. Alone in his privacy and shadow, the man he had just left was standing by a column, in motionless abstraction, looking over the distant garden. But the kindly, humorous face was almost tragic with an intensity of weariness! Every line of those strong, rustic features was relaxed under a burden which even the long, lank, angular figure — overgrown and unfinished as his own West — seemed to be distorted in its efforts to adjust itself to; while the dark, deep-set eyes were abstracted with the vague prescience of the prophet and the martyr. Shocked at that sudden change, Brant felt his cheek burn with shame. And he was about to break upon that wearied man's unbending; he was about

to add his petty burden to the shoulders of this Western Atlas. He drew back silently, and descended the stairs.

But before he had left the house, while mingling with the crowd in one of the larger rooms, he saw the President reappear beside an important, prosperous-looking figure, on whom the kindly giant was now smiling with humorous toleration. He noticed the divided attention of the crowd; the name of Senator Boompointer was upon every lip: he was nearly face to face with that famous dispenser of place and preferment — this second husband of Susy! An indescribable feeling — half cynical, half fateful — came over him. He would not have been surprised to see Jim Hooker join the throng, which now seemed to him to even dwarf the lonely central figure that had so lately touched him! He wanted to escape it all!

But his fate brought him to the entrance at the same moment that Boompointer was leaving it, and that distinguished man brushed hastily by him as a gorgeous carriage, drawn by two spirited horses, and driven by a resplendent negro coachman, dashed up. It was the Boompointer carriage.

A fashionably dressed, pretty woman, who, in style, bearing, opulent contentment, and ingenuous self-consciousness, was in perfect keeping with the slight ostentation of the equipage, was its only occupant. As Boompointer stepped into the vehicle, her blue eyes fell for an instant on Brant. A happy, childlike pink flush came into her cheeks, and a violet ray of recognition and mischief darted from her eyes to his. For it was Susy.

CHAPTER II

When Brant returned to his hotel there was an augmented respect in the voice of the clerk as he handed him a note with the remark that it had been left by Senator Boompointer's coachman. He had no difficulty in recognizing Susy's peculiarly Brobdingnagian school-girl hand.

"Kla'uns, I call it real mean! I believe you just *hoped* I would n't know you. If you 're a bit like your old self you 'll come right off here — this very night! I 've got a big party on — but we can talk somewhere between the acts! Have n't I growed? Tell me! And my! what a gloomy swell the young brigadier is! The carriage will come for you — so you have no excuse."

The effect of this childish note upon Brant was strangely out of proportion to its triviality. But then it was Susy's very triviality — so expressive of her characteristic irresponsibility — which had always affected him at such moments. Again, as at Robles, he felt it react against his own ethics. Was she not right in her delightful materialism? Was she not happier than if she had been consistently true to Mrs. Peyton, to the convent, to the episode of her theatrical career, to Jim Hooker — even to himself? And did he conscientiously believe that Hooker or himself had suffered from her inconsistency? No! From all that he had heard, she was a suitable helpmate to the senator, in her social attractiveness, her charming ostentations, her engaging vanity that disarmed suspicion, and her lack of responsibility even in her partisanship. Nobody ever dared to hold the senator responsible for her promises, even while enjoy-

ing the fellowship of both, and it is said that the worthy man singularly profited by it. Looking upon the invitation as a possible distraction to his gloomy thoughts, Brant resolved to go.

The moon was high as the carriage whirled him out of the still stifling avenues towards the Soldiers' Home — a sylvan suburb frequented by cabinet ministers and the President — where the good Senator had "decreed," like Kubla Khan, "a stately pleasure dome," to entertain his friends and partisans. As they approached the house, the trembling light like fireflies through the leaves, the warm silence broken only by a military band playing a drowsy waltz on the veranda, and the heavy odors of jessamine in the air, thrilled Brant with a sense of shame as he thought of his old comrades in the field. But this was presently dissipated by the uniforms that met him in the hall, with the presence of some of his distinguished superiors. At the head of the stairs, with a circling background of the shining crosses and ribbons of the diplomatic corps, stood Susy — her bare arms and neck glittering with diamonds, her face radiant with childlike vivacity. A significant pressure of her little glove as he made his bow seemed to be his only welcome, but a moment later she caught his arm. "You 've yet to know *him*," she said in a half whisper; "he thinks a good deal of himself — just like Jim. But he makes others believe it, and that 's where poor Jim slipped up." She paused before the man thus characteristically disposed of, and presented Brant. It was the man he had seen before — material, capable, dogmatic. A glance from his shrewd eyes — accustomed to the weighing of men's weaknesses and ambitions — and a few hurried phrases apparently satisfied him that Brant was not just then important or available to him, and the two men, a moment later, drifted easily apart. Brant sauntered listlessly through the crowded rooms, half re-

morsefully conscious that he had taken some irrevocable step, and none the less assured by the presence of two or three reporters and correspondents who were dogging his steps, or the glance of two or three pretty women whose curiosity had evidently been aroused by the singular abstraction of this handsome, distinguished, but sardonic-looking officer. But the next moment he was genuinely moved.

A tall young woman had just glided into the centre of the room with an indolent yet supple gracefulness that seemed familiar to him. A change in her position suddenly revealed her face. It was Miss Faulkner. Previously he had known her only in the riding-habit of Confederate gray which she had at first affected, or in the light muslin morning-dress she had worn at Gray Oaks. It seemed to him, to-night, that the studied elegance of her full dress became her still more; that the pretty willfulness of her chin and shoulders was chastened and modified by the pearls round her fair throat. Suddenly their eyes met; her face paled visibly; he fancied that she almost leaned against her companion for support; then she met his glance again with a face into which the color had as suddenly rushed, but with eyes that seemed to be appealing to him even to the point of pain and fright. Brant was not conceited; he could see that the girl's agitation was not the effect of any mere personal influence in his recognition, but of something else. He turned hastily away; when he looked around again she was gone.

Nevertheless he felt filled with a vague irritation. Did she think him such a fool as to imperil her safety by openly recognizing her without her consent? Did she think that he would dare to presume upon the service she had done him? Or, more outrageous thought, had she heard of his disgrace, known its cause, and feared that he would drag her into a disclosure to save himself? No,

no; she could not think that! She had perhaps regretted what she had done in a freak of girlish chivalry; she had returned to her old feelings and partisanship; she was only startled at meeting the single witness of her folly. Well, she need not fear! He would as studiously avoid her hereafter, and she should know it. And yet — yes, there was a "yet." For he could not forget — indeed, in the past three weeks it had been more often before him than he cared to think — that she was the one human being who had been capable of a great act of self-sacrifice for him — her enemy, her accuser, the man who had scarcely treated her civilly. He was ashamed to remember now that this thought had occurred to him at the bedside of his wife — at the hour of her escape — even on the fatal slope on which he had been struck down. And now this fond illusion must go with the rest — the girl who had served him so loyally was ashamed of it! A bitter smile crossed his face.

"Well, I don't wonder! Here are all the women asking me who is that good-looking Mephistopheles, with the burning eyes, who is prowling around my rooms as if searching for a victim. Why, you 're smiling for all the world like poor Jim when he used to do the Red Avenger."

Susy's voice — and illustration — recalled him to himself.

"Furious I may be," he said with a gentler smile, although his eyes still glittered, — "furious that I have to wait until the one woman I came to see — the one woman I have not seen for so long, while these puppets have been nightly dancing before her — can give me a few moments from them, to talk of the old days."

In his reaction he was quite sincere, although he felt a slight sense of remorse as he saw the quick, faint color rise, as in those old days, even through the to-night's powder of her cheek.

"That 's like the old Kla'uns," she said, with a slight pressure of his arm, "but we will not have a chance to speak until later. When they are nearly all gone, you 'll take me to get a little refreshment, and we 'll have a chat in the conservatory. But you must drop that awfully wicked look and make yourself generally agreeable to those women until then."

It was, perhaps, part of this reaction which enabled him to obey his hostess's commands with a certain recklessness that, however, seemed to be in keeping with the previous Satanic reputation he had all unconsciously achieved. The women listened to the cynical flippancy of this good-looking soldier with an undisguised admiration which in turn excited curiosity and envy from his own sex. He saw the whispered questioning, the lifted eyebrows, scornful shrugging of shoulders — and knew that the story of his disgrace was in the air. But I fear this only excited him to further recklessness and triumph. Once he thought he recognized Miss Faulkner's figure at a distance, and even fancied that she had been watching him; but he only redoubled his attentions to the fair woman beside him, and looked no more.

Yet he was glad when the guests began to drop off, the great rooms thinned, and Susy, appearing on the arm of her husband, coquettishly reminded him of his promise.

"For I want to talk to you of old times. General Brant," she went on, turning explanatorily to Boompointer, "married my adopted mother in California — at Robles, a dear old place where I spent my earliest years. So, you see, we are sort of relations by marriage," she added, with delightful naïveté.

Hooker's own vainglorious allusion to his relation to the man before him flashed across Brant's mind, but it left now only a smile on his lips. He felt he had already become a part of the irresponsible comedy played around

him. Why should he resist, or examine its ethics too closely? He offered his arm to Susy as they descended the stairs, but, instead of pausing in the supper-room, she simply passed through it with a significant pressure on his arm, and, drawing aside a muslin curtain, stepped into the moonlit conservatory. Behind the curtain there was a small rustic settee; without releasing his arm she sat down, so that when he dropped beside her, their hands met, and mutually clasped.

"Now, Kla'uns," she said, with a slight, comfortable shiver as she nestled beside him, "it's a little like your chair down at old Robles, isn't it? — tell me! And to think it's five years ago! But, Kla'uns, what's the matter? You are changed," she said, looking at his dark face in the moonlight, "or you have something to tell me."

"I have."

"And it's something dreadful, I know!" she said, wrinkling her brows with a pretty terror. "Could n't you pretend you had told it to me, and let us go on just the same? Could n't you, Kla'uns? Tell me!"

"I am afraid I could n't," he said, with a sad smile.

"Is it about yourself, Kla'uns? You know," she went on with cheerful rapidity, "I know everything about you — I always did, you know — and I don't care, and never did care, and it don't, and never did, make the slightest difference to me. So don't tell it, and waste time, Kla'uns."

"It's not about me, but about my wife!" he said slowly.

Her expression changed slightly.

"Oh, her!" she said after a pause. Then, half resignedly, "Go on, Kla'uns."

He began. He had a dozen times rehearsed to himself his miserable story, always feeling it keenly, and even

fearing that he might be carried away by emotion or morbid sentiment in telling it to another. But, to his astonishment, he found himself telling it practically, calmly, almost cynically, to his old playmate, repressing the half devotion and even tenderness that had governed him, from the time that his wife, disguised as the mulatto woman, had secretly watched him at his office, to the hour that he had passed her through the lines. He withheld only the incident of Miss Faulkner's complicity and sacrifice.

"And she got away, after having kicked you out of your place, Kla'uns?" said Susy, when he had ended.

Clarence stiffened beside her. But he felt he had gone too far to quarrel with his confidante.

"She went away. I honestly believe we shall never meet again, or I should not be telling you this!"

"Kla'uns," she said lightly, taking his hand again, "don't you believe it! She won't let you go. You 're one of those men that a woman, when she 's once hooked on to, won't let go of, even when she believes she no longer loves him, or meets bigger and better men. I reckon it 's because you 're so different from other men; maybe there are so many different things about you to hook on to, and you don't slip off as easily as the others. Now, if you were like old Peyton, her first husband, or like poor Jim, or even my Boompointer, you 'd be all right! No, my boy, all we can do is to try to keep her from getting at you here. I reckon she won't trust herself in Washington again in a hurry."

"But I cannot stay here; my career is in the field."

"Your career is alongside o' me, honey — and Boompointer. But nearer *me*. We 'll fix all that. I heard something about your being in disgrace, but the story was that you were sweet on some secesh girl down there, and neglected your business, Kla'uns. But, Lordy! to think it was only your own wife! Never mind; we 'll straighten

that out. We 've had worse jobs than that on. Why, there was that commissary who was buying up dead horses at one end of the field and selling them to the Government for mess beef at the other; and there was that general who would n't make an attack when it rained; and the other general — you know who I mean, Kla'uns — who would n't invade the State where his sister lived; but we straightened them out, somehow, and they were a heap worse than you. We 'll get you a position in the war department here, one of the bureau offices, where you keep your rank and your uniform — you don't look bad in it, Kla'uns — on better pay. And you 'll come and see me, and we 'll talk over old times."

Brant felt his heart turn sick within him. But he was at her mercy now! He said, with an effort, —

"But I 've told you that my career — nay, my *life* — now is in the field."

"Don't you be a fool, Kla'uns, and leave it there! You have done your work of fighting — mighty good fighting, too, — and everybody knows it. You 've earned a change. Let others take your place."

He shuddered, as he remembered that his wife had made the same appeal. Was he a fool then, and these two women — so totally unlike in everything — right in this?

"Come, Kla'uns," said Susy, relapsing again against his shoulder. "Now talk to me! You don't say what you think of me, of my home, of my furniture, of my position — even of him! Tell me!"

"I find you well, prosperous, and happy," he said, with a faint smile.

"Is that all? And how do I look?"

She turned her still youthful, mischievous face towards him in the moonlight. The witchery of her blue eyes was still there as of old, the same frank irresponsibility beamed

from them; her parted lips seemed to give him back the breath of his youth. He started, but she did not.

"Susy, dear!"

It was her husband's voice.

"I quite forgot," the Senator went on, as he drew the curtain aside, "that you are engaged with a friend; but Miss Faulkner is waiting to say good-night, and I volunteered to find you."

"Tell her to wait a moment," said Susy, with an impatience that was as undisguised as it was without embarrassment or confusion.

But Miss Faulkner, unconsciously following Mr. Boompointer, was already upon them. For a moment the whole four were silent, although perfectly composed. Senator Boompointer, unconscious of any infelicity in his interruption, was calmly waiting. Clarence, opposed suddenly to the young girl whom he believed was avoiding his recognition, rose, coldly imperturbable. Miss Faulkner, looking taller and more erect in the long folds of her satin cloak, neither paled nor blushed, as she regarded Susy and Brant with a smile of well-bred apology.

"I expect to leave Washington to-morrow, and may not be able to call again," she said, "or I would not have so particularly pressed a leave-taking upon you."

"I was talking with my old friend, General Brant," said Susy, more by way of introduction than apology.

Brant bowed. For an instant the clear eyes of Miss Faulkner slipped icily across his as she made him an old-fashioned Southern courtesy, and, taking Susy's arm, she left the room. Brant did not linger, but took leave of his host almost in the same breath. At the front door a well-appointed carriage of one of the Legations had just rolled into waiting. He looked back; he saw Miss Faulkner, erect and looking like a bride in her gauzy draperies, descending the stairs before the waiting servants. He felt

his heart beat strangely. He hesitated, recalled himself with an effort, hurriedly stepped from the porch into the path, as he heard the carriage door close behind him in the distance, and then felt the dust from her horse's hoofs rise around him as she drove past him and away.

CHAPTER III

Although Brant was convinced as soon as he left the house that he could not accept anything from the Boompointer influence, and that his interview with Susy was fruitless, he knew that he must temporize. While he did not believe that his old playmate would willingly betray him, he was uneasy when he thought of the vanity and impulsiveness which might compromise him — or of a possible jealousy that might seek revenge. Yet he had no reason to believe that Susy's nature was jealous, or that she was likely to have any cause; but the fact remained that Miss Faulkner's innocent intrusion upon their tête-à-tête affected him more strongly than anything else in his interview with Susy. Once out of the atmosphere of that house, it struck him, too, that Miss Faulkner was almost as much of an alien in it as himself. He wondered what she had been doing there. Could it be possible that she was obtaining information for the South? But he rejected the idea as quickly as it had occurred to him. Perhaps there could be no stronger proof of the unconscious influence the young girl already had over him.

He remembered the liveries of the diplomatic carriage that had borne her away, and ascertained without difficulty that her sister had married one of the foreign ministers, and that she was a guest in his house. But he was the more astonished to hear that she and her sister were considered to be Southern Unionists — and were greatly petted in governmental circles for their sacrificing fidelity to the flag. His informant, an official in the State Depart-

ment, added that Miss Matilda might have been a good deal of a madcap at the outbreak of the war — for the sisters had a brother in the Confederate service — but that she had changed greatly, and, indeed, within a month. "For," he added, "she was at the White House for the first time last week, and they say the President talked more to her than to any other woman."

The indescribable sensation with which this simple information filled Brant startled him more than the news itself. Hope, joy, fear, distrust, and despair, alternately distracted him. He recalled Miss Faulkner's almost agonizing glance of appeal to him in the drawing-room at Susy's, and it seemed to be equally consistent with the truth of what he had just heard — or some monstrous treachery and deceit of which she might be capable. Even now she might be a secret emissary of some spy within the President's family; she might have been in correspondence with some traitor in the Boompointer clique, and her imploring glance only the result of a fear of exposure. Or, again, she might have truly recanted after her escapade at Gray Oaks, and feared only his recollection of her as go-between of spies. And yet both of these presumptions were inconsistent with her conduct in the conservatory. It seemed impossible that this impulsive woman, capable of doing what he had himself known her to do, and equally sensitive to the shame or joy of such impulses, should be the same conventional woman of society who had so coldly recognized and parted from him.

But this interval of doubt was transitory. The next day he received a dispatch from the War Department, ordering him to report himself for duty at once. With a beating heart he hurried to the Secretary. But that official had merely left a memorandum with his assistant directing General Brant to accompany some fresh levies to a camp of "organization" near the front. Brant felt a

chill of disappointment. Duties of this kind had been left to dubious regular army veterans, hurriedly displaced general officers, and favored detrimentals. But if it was not restoration, it was no longer inaction, and it was at least a release from Washington.

It was also evidently the result of some influence — but hardly that of the Boompointers, for he knew that Susy wished to keep him at the capital. Was there another power at work to send him away from Washington? His previous doubts returned. Nor were they dissipated when the chief of the bureau placed a letter before him with the remark that it had been entrusted to him by a lady with the request that it should be delivered only into his own hands.

"She did not know your hotel address, but ascertained you were to call here. She said it was of some importance. There is no mystery about it, General," continued the official with a mischievous glance at Brant's handsome, perplexed face, "although it 's from a very pretty woman — whom we all know."

"Mrs. Boompointer?" suggested Brant, with affected lightness.

It was a maladroit speech. The official's face darkened.

"We have not yet become a Postal Department for the Boompointers, General," he said dryly, "however great their influence elsewhere. It was from rather a different style of woman — Miss Faulkner. You will receive your papers later at your hotel, and leave to-night."

Brant's unlucky slip was still potent enough to divert the official's attention, or he would have noticed the change in his visitor's face, and the abruptness of his departure.

Once in the street, Brant tore off the envelope. But beneath it was another, on which was written in a delicate, refined hand: "Please do not open this until you reach your destination."

Then she knew he was going! And perhaps this was her influence? All his suspicions again returned. She knew he was going near the lines, and his very appointment, through her power, might be a plot to serve her and the enemy! Was this letter, which she was entrusting to him, the cover of some missive to her Southern friends which she expected him to carry — perhaps as a return for her own act of self-sacrifice? Was this the appeal she had been making to his chivalry, his gratitude, his honor? The perspiration stood in beads on his forehead. What defect lay hidden in his nature that seemed to make him an easy victim of these intriguing women? He had not even the excuse of gallantry; less susceptible to the potencies of the sex than most men, he was still compelled to bear that reputation. He remembered his coldness to Miss Faulkner in the first days of their meeting, and her effect upon his subalterns. Why had she selected him from among them — when she could have modeled the others like wax to her purposes? Why? And yet with the question came a possible answer that he hardly dared to think of — that in its very vagueness seemed to fill him with a stimulating thrill and hopefulness. He quickened his pace. He would take the letter, and yet be master of himself when the time came to open it.

That time came three days later, in his tent at Three Pines Crossing. As he broke open the envelope, he was relieved to find that it contained no other inclosure, and seemed intended only for himself. It began abruptly: —

"When you read this, you will understand why I did not speak to you when we met last night; why I even dreaded that you might speak to me, knowing, as I did, what I ought to tell you at that place and moment — something you could only know from me. I did not know you were in Washington, although I knew you were relieved; I had no way of seeing you or sending to you before, and

I only came to Mrs. Boompointer's party in the hope of hearing news of you.

"You know that my brother was captured by your pickets in company with another officer. He thinks you suspected the truth — that he and his friend were hovering near your lines to effect the escape of the spy. But he says that, although they failed to help her, she did escape, or was passed through the lines by your connivance. He says that you seemed to know her, that from what Rose — the mulatto woman — told him, you and she were evidently old friends. I would not speak of this, nor intrude upon your private affairs, only that I think you ought to know that *I* had no knowledge of it when I was in your house, but believed her to be a stranger to you. You gave me no intimation that you knew her, and I believed that you were frank with me. But I should not speak of this at all — for I believe that it would have made no difference to me in repairing the wrong that I thought I had done you — only that, as I am forced by circumstances to tell you the terrible ending of this story, you ought to know it all.

"My brother wrote to me that the evening after you left, the burying party picked up the body of what they believed to be a mulatto woman lying on the slope. It was not Rose, but the body of the very woman — the real and only spy — whom you had passed through the lines. She was accidentally killed by the Confederates in the first attack upon you, at daybreak. But only my brother and his friend recognized her through her blackened face and disguise, and on the plea that she was a servant of one of their friends, they got permission from the division commander to take her away, and she was buried by her friends and among her people in the little cemetery of Three Pines Crossing, not far from where you have gone. My brother thought that I ought to tell you this: it seems

that he and his friend had a strange sympathy for you in what they appear to know or guess of your relations with that woman, and I think he was touched by what he thought was your kindness and chivalry to him on account of his sister. But I do not think he ever knew, or will know how great is the task that he has imposed upon me.

"You know now, do you not, *why* I did not speak to you when we first met; it seemed so impossible to do it in an atmosphere and a festivity that was so incongruous with the dreadful message I was charged with. And when I had to meet you later — perhaps I may have wronged you — but it seemed to me that you were so preoccupied and interested with other things that I might perhaps only be wearying you with something you cared little for, or perhaps already knew and had quickly forgotten.

"I had been wanting to say something else to you when I had got rid of my dreadful message. I do not know if you still care to hear it. But you were once generous enough to think that I had done you a service in bringing a letter to your commander. Although I know better than anybody else the genuine devotion to your duty that made you accept my poor service, from all that I can hear, you have never had the credit of it. Will you not try me again? I am more in favor here, and I might yet be more successful in showing your superiors how true you have been to your trust, even if you have little faith in your friend, Matilda Faulkner."

For a long time he remained motionless, with the letter in his hand. Then he arose, ordered his horse, and galloped away.

There was little difficulty in finding the cemetery of Three Pines Crossing — a hillside slope, hearsed with pine and cypress, and starred with white crosses, that in the distance looked like flowers. Still less was there in finding the newer marble shaft among the older lichen-spotted

slabs, which bore the simple words: "Alice Benham, Martyr." A few Confederate soldiers, under still plainer and newer wooden headstones, carved only with initials, lay at her feet. Brant sank on his knees beside the grave, but he was shocked to see that the base of the marble was stained with the red pollen of the fateful lily, whose blossoms had been heaped upon her mound, but whose fallen petals lay dark and sodden in decay.

How long he remained there he did not know. And then a solitary bugle from the camp seemed to summon him, as it had once before summoned him, and he went away — as he had gone before — to a separation that he now knew was for all time.

Then followed a month of superintendence and drill, and the infusing into the little camp under his instruction the spirit which seemed to be passing out of his own life forever. Shut in by alien hills on the borderland of the great struggle, from time to time reports reached him of the bitter fighting, and almost disastrous successes of his old division commander. Orders came from Washington to hurry the preparation of his raw levies to the field, and a faint hope sprang up in his mind. But following it came another dispatch ordering his return to the Capital.

He reached it with neither hope nor fear — so benumbed had become his spirit under this last trial, and what seemed to be now the mockery of this last sacrifice to his wife. Though it was no longer a question of her life and safety, he knew that he could still preserve her memory from stain by keeping her secret, even though its divulgings might clear himself. For that reason, he had even hesitated to inform Susy of her death, in the fear that, in her thoughtless irresponsibility and impulsiveness, she might be tempted to use it in his favor. He had made his late appointment a plea for her withholding any present efforts to assist him. He even avoided the Boompointers' house,

in what he believed was partly a duty to the memory of his wife. But he saw no inconsistency in occasionally extending his lonely walks to the vicinity of a foreign Legation, or in being lifted with a certain expectation at the sight of its liveries on the Avenue. There was a craving for sympathy in his heart, which Miss Faulkner's letter had awakened.

Meantime, he had reported himself for duty at the War Department — with little hope, however, in that formality. But he was surprised the next day when the chief of the bureau informed him that his claim was before the President.

"I was not aware that I had presented any claim," he said, a little haughtily.

The bureau chief looked up with some surprise. This quiet, patient, reserved man had puzzled him once or twice before.

"Perhaps I should say 'case,' General," he said dryly. "But the personal interest of the highest executive in the land strikes me as being desirable in anything."

"I only mean that I have obeyed the orders of the department in reporting myself here, as I have done," said Brant, with less feeling, but none the less firmness; "and I should imagine it was not the duty of a soldier to question them. Which I fancy a 'claim' or a 'case' would imply."

He had no idea of taking this attitude before, but the disappointments of the past month, added to this first official notice of his disgrace, had brought forward that dogged, reckless, yet half-scornful obstinacy that was part of his nature.

The official smiled.

"I suppose, then, you are waiting to hear from the President," he said dryly.

"I am awaiting orders from the department," returned

Brant quietly, "but whether they originate in the President as commander-in-chief, or not — it is not for me to inquire."

Even when he reached his hotel this half-savage indifference which had taken the place of his former incertitude had not changed. It seemed to him that he had reached the crisis of his life where he was no longer a free agent, and could wait, superior alike to effort or expectation. And it was with a merely dispassionate curiosity that he found a note the next morning from the President's private secretary, informing him that the President would see him early that day.

A few hours later he was ushered through the public rooms of the White House to a more secluded part of the household. The messenger stopped before a modest door and knocked. It was opened by a tall figure — the President himself. He reached out a long arm to Brant, who stood hesitatingly on the threshold, grasped his hand, and led him into the room. It had a single, large, elaborately draped window and a handsome medallioned carpet, which contrasted with the otherwise almost appalling simplicity of the furniture. A single plain angular desk, with a blotting pad and a few sheets of large foolscap upon it, a waste-paper basket and four plain armchairs, completed the interior with a contrast as simple and homely as its long-limbed, black-coated occupant. Releasing the hand of the general to shut a door which opened into another apartment, the President shoved an armchair towards him and sank somewhat wearily into another before the desk. But only for a moment; the long shambling limbs did not seem to adjust themselves easily to the chair; the high narrow shoulders drooped to find a more comfortable lounging attitude, shifted from side to side, and the long legs moved dispersedly. Yet the face that was turned towards Brant was humorous and tranquil.

"I was told I should have to send for you if I wished to see you," he said smilingly.

Already mollified, and perhaps again falling under the previous influence of this singular man, Brant began somewhat hesitatingly to explain.

But the President checked him gently, —

"You don't understand. It was something new to my experience here to find an able-bodied American citizen with an honest genuine grievance who had to have it drawn from him like a decayed tooth. But you have been here before. I seem to remember your face."

Brant's reserve had gone. He admitted that he had twice sought an audience — but —

"You dodged the dentist! That was wrong." As Brant made a slight movement of deprecation the President continued: "I understand! Not from fear of giving pain to yourself but to others. I don't know that *that* is right, either. A certain amount of pain must be suffered in this world — even by one's enemies. Well, I have looked into your case, General Brant." He took up a piece of paper from his desk, scrawled with two or three notes in pencil. "I think this is the way it stands. You were commanding a position at Gray Oaks when information was received by the department that, either through neglect or complicity, spies were passing through your lines. There was no attempt to prove your neglect; your orders, the facts of your personal care and precaution, were all before the department. But it was also shown that your wife, from whom you were only temporarily separated, was a notorious secessionist; that, before the war, you yourself were suspected, and that, therefore, you were quite capable of evading your own orders, which you may have only given as a blind. On this information you were relieved by the department of your command. Later on it was discovered that the spy was none other than your own wife, disguised

as a mulatto; that, after her arrest by your own soldiers, you connived at her escape — and this was considered conclusive proof of — well, let us say — your treachery."

"But I did not know it was my wife until she was arrested," said Brant impulsively.

The President knitted his eyebrows humorously.

"Don't let us travel out of the record, General. "You 're as bad as the department. The question was one of your personal treachery, but you need not accept the fact that you were justly removed because your wife was a spy. Now, General, I am an old lawyer, and I don't mind telling you that in Illinois we would n't hang a yellow dog on that evidence before the department. But when I was asked to look into the matter by your friends, I discovered something of more importance to you. I had been trying to find a scrap of evidence that would justify the presumption that you had sent information to the enemy. I found that it was based upon the fact of the enemy being in possession of knowledge at the first battle at Gray Oaks, which could only have been obtained from our side, and which led to a Federal disaster; that you, however, retrieved by your gallantry. I then asked the secretary if he was prepared to show that you had sent the information with that view, or that you had been overtaken by a tardy sense of repentance. He preferred to consider my suggestion as humorous. But the inquiry led to my further discovery that the only treasonable correspondence actually in evidence was found upon the body of a trusted Federal officer, and had been forwarded to the division commander. But there was no record of it in the case."

"Why, I forwarded it myself," said Brant eagerly.

"So the division commander writes," said the President, smiling, "and he forwarded it to the department. But it was suppressed in some way. Have you any enemies. General Brant?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then you probably have. You are young and successful. Think of the hundred other officers who naturally believe themselves better than you are, and have n't a traitorous wife. Still, the department may have made an example of you for the benefit of the only man who could n't profit by it."

"Might it not have been, sir, that this suppression was for the good report of the service — as the chief offender was dead?"

"I am glad to hear you say so, General, for it is the argument I have used successfully in behalf of your wife."

"Then you know it all, sir?" said Brant after a gloomy pause.

"All, I think. Come, General, you seemed just now to be uncertain about your enemies. Let me assure you, you need not be so in regard to your friends.

"I dare to hope I have found one, sir," said Brant with almost boyish timidity.

"Oh, not me!" said the President, with a laugh of deprecation. "Some one much more potent."

"May I know his name, Mr. President?"

"No, for it is a woman. You were nearly ruined by one, General. I suppose it 's quite right that you should be saved by one. And, of course, irregularly."

"A woman!" echoed Brant.

"Yes; one who was willing to confess herself a worse spy than your wife — a double traitor — to save you! Upon my word, General, I don't know if the department was far wrong; a man with such an alternately unsettling and convincing effect upon a woman's highest political convictions should be under some restraint. Luckily the department knows nothing of it."

"Nor would any one else have known from me," said Brant eagerly. "I trust that she did not think — that you, sir, did not for an instant believe that I" —

"Oh dear, no! Nobody would have believed you! It was her free confidence to me. That was what made the affair so difficult to handle. For even her bringing your dispatch to the division commander looked bad for you; and you know he even doubted its authenticity."

"Does she — does Miss Faulkner know the spy was my wife?" hesitated Brant.

The President twisted himself in his chair, so as to regard Brant more gravely with his deep-set eyes, and then thoughtfully rubbed his leg.

"Don't let us travel out of the record, General," he said after a pause. But as the color surged into Brant's cheek he raised his eyes to the ceiling, and said, in half-humorous recollection, —

"No, I think *that* fact was first gathered from your other friend — Mr. Hooker."

"Hooker!" said Brant indignantly; "did he come here?"

"Pray don't destroy my faith in Mr. Hooker, General," said the President, in half-weary, half-humorous deprecation. "Don't tell me that any of his inventions are *true!* Leave me at least that magnificent liar — the one perfectly intelligible witness you have. For from the time that he first appeared here with a grievance and a claim for a commission, he has been an unspeakable joy to me and a convincing testimony to you. Other witnesses have been partisans and prejudiced; Mr. Hooker was frankly true to himself. How else should I have known of the care you took to disguise yourself, save the honor of your uniform, and run the risk of being shot as an unknown spy at your wife's side, except from his magnificent version of *his* part in it? How else should I have known the story of your discovery of the Californian conspiracy, except from his supreme portrayal of it, with himself as the hero? No, you must not forget to thank Mr. Hooker when you meet

him. Miss Faulkner is at present more accessible; she is calling on some members of my family in the next room. Shall I leave you with her?"

Brant rose with a pale face and a quickly throbbing heart as the President, glancing at the clock, untwisted himself from the chair, and shook himself out full length, and rose gradually to his feet.

"Your wish for active service is granted, General Brant," he said slowly, "and you will at once rejoin your old division commander, who is now at the head of the Tenth Army Corps. But," he said, after a deliberate pause, "there are certain rules and regulations of your service that even *I* cannot, with decent respect to your department, override. You will, therefore, understand that you cannot rejoin the army in your former position."

The slight flush that came to Brant's cheek quickly passed. And there was only the unmistakable sparkle of renewed youth in his frank eyes as he said, —

"Let me go to the front again, Mr. President, and I care not *how*."

The President smiled, and, laying his heavy hand on Brant's shoulder, pushed him gently towards the door of the inner room.

"I was only about to say," he added, as he opened the door, "that it would be necessary for you to rejoin your promoted commander as a major-general. And," he continued, lifting his voice, as he gently pushed his guest into the room, "he has n't even thanked me for it, Miss Faulkner!"

The door closed behind him, and he stood for a moment dazed, and still hearing the distant voice of the President, in the room he had just quitted, now welcoming a new visitor. But the room before him, opening into a conservatory, was empty, save for a single figure that turned, half timidly, half mischievously, towards him. The same

quick, sympathetic glance was in both their faces; the same timid, happy look in both their eyes. He moved quickly to her side.

"Then you knew that — that — woman was my wife?" he said, hurriedly, as he grasped her hand.

She cast a half-appealing look at his face — a half-frightened one around the room and at the open door beyond.

"Let us," she said faintly, "go into the conservatory."

. . . . . .

It is but a few years ago that the veracious chronicler of these pages moved with a wondering crowd of sightseers in the gardens of the White House. The war cloud had long since lifted and vanished; the Potomac flowed peacefully by and on to where once lay the broad plantation of a great Confederate leader — now a national cemetery that had gathered the soldier dead of both sections side by side in equal rest and honor — and the great goddess once more looked down serenely from the dome of the white Capitol. The chronicler's attention was attracted by an erect, handsome soldierly-looking man, with a beard and mustache slightly streaked with gray, pointing out the various objects of interest to a boy of twelve or fourteen at his side.

"Yes; although, as I told you, this house belongs only to the President of the United States and his family," said the gentleman smilingly, "in that little conservatory I proposed to your mother."

"Oh! Clarence, how can you!" said the lady reproyingly, "you know it was *long* after that!"

AN INGENUE OF THE SIERRAS

I

We all held our breath as the coach rushed through the semi-darkness of Galloper's Ridge. The vehicle itself was only a huge lumbering shadow; its side-lights were carefully extinguished, and Yuba Bill had just politely removed from the lips of an outside passenger even the cigar with which he had been ostentatiously exhibiting his coolness. For it had been rumored that the Ramon Martinez gang of "road agents" were "laying" for us on the second grade, and would time the passage of our lights across Galloper's in order to intercept us in the "brush" beyond. If we could cross the ridge without being seen, and so get through the brush before they reached it, we were safe. If they followed, it would only be a stern chase with the odds in our favor.

The huge vehicle swayed from side to side, rolled, dipped, and plunged, but Bill kept the track, as if, in the whispered words of the Expressman, he could "feel and smell" the road he could no longer see. We knew that at times we hung perilously over the edge of slopes that eventually dropped a thousand feet sheer to the tops of the sugar-pines below, but we knew that Bill knew it also. The half visible heads of the horses, drawn wedge-wise together by the tightened reins, appeared to cleave the darkness like a ploughshare, held between his rigid hands. Even the hoof-beats of the six horses had fallen into a vague, monotonous, distant roll. Then the ridge was crossed, and we plunged into the still blacker obscurity of

the brush. Rather we no longer seemed to move — it was only the phantom night that rushed by us. The horses might have been submerged in some swift Lethean stream; nothing but the top of the coach and the rigid bulk of Yuba Bill arose above them. Yet even in that awful moment our speed was unslackened; it was as if Bill cared no longer to *guide* but only to drive, or as if the direction of his huge machine was determined by other hands than his. An incautious whisperer hazarded the paralyzing suggestion of our "meeting another team." To our great astonishment Bill overheard it; to our greater astonishment he replied. "It 'ud be only a neck and neck race which would get to h—ll first," he said quietly. But we were relieved — for he had *spoken!* Almost simultaneously the wider turnpike began to glimmer faintly as a visible track before us; the wayside trees fell out of line, opened up, and dropped off one after another; we were on the broader tableland, out of danger, and apparently unperceived and unpursued.

Nevertheless in the conversation that broke out again with the relighting of the lamps, and the comments, congratulations, and reminiscences that were freely exchanged, Yuba Bill preserved a dissatisfied and even resentful silence. The most generous praise of his skill and courage awoke no response. "I reckon the old man waz just spilin' for a fight, and is feelin' disappointed," said a passenger. But those who knew that Bill had the true fighter's scorn for any purely purposeless conflict were more or less concerned and watchful of him. He would drive steadily for four or five minutes with thoughtfully knitted brows, but eyes still keenly observant under his slouched hat, and then, relaxing his strained attitude, would give way to a movement of impatience. "You ain't uneasy about anything, Bill, are you?" asked the Expressman confidentially. Bill lifted his eyes with a

slightly contemptuous surprise. "Not about anything ter *come*. It 's what *hez* happened that I don't exackly *sabe*. I don't see no signs of Ramon's gang ever havin' been out at all, and ef they were out I don't see why they did n't go for us."

"The simple fact is that our ruse was successful," said an outside passenger. "They waited to see our lights on the ridge, and, not seeing them, missed us until we had passed. That 's my opinion."

"You ain't puttin' any price on that opinion, air ye?" inquired Bill politely.

"No."

"'Cos thar 's a comic paper in 'Frisco pays for them things, and I 've seen worse things in it."

"Come off, Bill," retorted the passenger, slightly nettled by the tittering of his companions. "Then what did you put out the lights for?"

"Well," returned Bill grimly, "it mout have been because I did n't keer to hev you chaps blazin' away at the first bush you *thought* you saw move in your skeer, and bringin' down their fire on us."

The explanation, though unsatisfactory, was by no means an improbable one, and we thought it better to accept it with a laugh. Bill, however, resumed his abstracted manner.

"Who got in at the Summit?" he at last asked abruptly of the Expressman.

"Derrick and Simpson of Cold Spring, and one of the 'Excelsior' boys," responded the Expressman.

"And that Pike County girl from Dow's Flat, with her bundles. Don't forget her," added the outside passenger ironically.

"Does anybody here know her?" continued Bill, ignoring the irony.

"You 'd better ask Judge Thompson; he was mighty

attentive to her; gettin' her a seat by the off window, and lookin' after her bundles and things."

"Gettin' her a seat by the *window?*" repeated Bill.

"Yes, she wanted to see everything, and was n't afraid of the shooting."

"Yes," broke in a third passenger, "and he was so d—d civil that when she dropped her ring in the straw, he struck a match agin all your rules, you know, and held it for her to find it. And it was just as we were crossin' through the brush, too. I saw the hull thing through the window, for I was hanging over the wheels with my gun ready for action. And it was n't no fault of Judge Thompson's if his d—d foolishness had n't shown us up, and got us a shot from the gang."

Bill gave a short grunt, but drove steadily on without further comment or even turning his eyes to the speaker.

We were now not more than a mile from the station at the crossroads where we were to change horses. The lights already glimmered in the distance, and there was a faint suggestion of the coming dawn on the summits of the ridge to the west. We had plunged into a belt of timber, when suddenly a horseman emerged at a sharp canter from a trail that seemed to be parallel with our own. We were all slightly startled; Yuba Bill alone preserving his moody calm.

"Hullo!" he said.

The stranger wheeled to our side as Bill slackened his speed. He seemed to be a "packer" or freight muleteer.

"Ye did n't get 'held up' on the Divide?" continued Bill cheerfully.

"No," returned the packer, with a laugh; "*I* don't carry treasure. But I see you 're all right, too. I saw you crossin' over Galloper's."

"*Saw* us?" said Bill sharply. "We had our lights out."

"Yes, but there was suthin' white — a handkerchief or woman's veil, I reckon — hangin' from the window. It was only a movin' spot agin the hillside, but ez I was lookin' out for ye I knew it was you by that. Good-night!"

He cantered away. We tried to look at each other's faces, and at Bill's expression in the darkness, but he neither spoke nor stirred until he threw down the reins when we stopped before the station. The passengers quickly descended from the roof; the Expressman was about to follow, but Bill plucked his sleeve.

"I'm goin' to take a look over this yer stage and these yer passengers with ye, afore we start."

"Why, what 's up?"

"Well," said Bill, slowly disengaging himself from one of his enormous gloves, "when we waltzed down into the brush up there I saw a man, ez plain ez I see you, rise up from it. I thought our time had come and the band was goin' to play, when he sorter drew back, made a sign, and we just scooted past him."

"Well?"

"Well," said Bill, "it means that this yer coach was *passed through free* to-night."

"You don't object to *that* — surely? I think we were deucedly lucky."

Bill slowly drew off his other glove. "I've been riskin' my everlastin' life on this d—d line three times a week," he said with mock humility, "and I'm allus thankful for small mercies. *But,*" he added grimly, "when it comes down to being passed free by some pal of a hoss thief, and thet called a speshal Providence, *I ain't in it!* No, sir, I ain't in it!"

II

It was with mixed emotions that the passengers heard that a delay of fifteen minutes to tighten certain screw-bolts had been ordered by the autocratic Bill. Some were anxious to get their breakfast at Sugar Pine, but others were not averse to linger for the daylight that promised greater safety on the road. The Expressman, knowing the real cause of Bill's delay, was nevertheless at a loss to understand the object of it. The passengers were all well known; any idea of complicity with the road agents was wild and impossible, and, even if there was a confederate of the gang among them, he would have been more likely to precipitate a robbery than to check it. Again, the discovery of such a confederate — to whom they clearly owed their safety — and his arrest would have been quite against the Californian sense of justice, if not actually illegal. It seemed evident that Bill's quixotic sense of honor was leading him astray.

The station consisted of a stable, a wagon shed, and a building containing three rooms. The first was fitted up with "bunks" or sleeping berths for the employees; the second was the kitchen; and the third and larger apartment was dining-room or sitting-room, and was used as general waiting-room for the passengers. It was not a refreshment station, and there was no "bar." But a mysterious command from the omnipotent Bill produced a demijohn of whiskey, with which he hospitably treated the company. The seductive influence of the liquor loosened the tongue of the gallant Judge Thompson. He

admitted to having struck a match to enable the fair Pike Countian to find her ring, which, however, proved to have fallen in her lap. She was "a fine, healthy young woman — a type of the Far West, sir; in fact, quite a prairie blossom! yet simple and guileless as a child." She was on her way to Marysville, he believed, "although she expected to meet friends — a friend, in fact — later on." It was her first visit to a large town — in fact, any civilized centre — since she crossed the plains three years ago. Her girlish curiosity was quite touching, and her innocence irresistible. In fact, in a country whose tendency was to produce "frivolity and forwardness in young girls, he found her a most interesting young person." She was even then out in the stable-yard watching the horses being harnessed, "preferring to indulge a pardonable healthy young curiosity than to listen to the empty compliments of the younger passengers."

The figure which Bill saw thus engaged, without being otherwise distinguished, certainly seemed to justify the Judge's opinion. She appeared to be a well-matured country girl, whose frank gray eyes and large laughing mouth expressed a wholesome and abiding gratification in her life and surroundings. She was watching the replacing of luggage in the boot. A little feminine start, as one of her own parcels was thrown somewhat roughly on the roof, gave Bill his opportunity. "Now there," he growled to the helper, "ye ain't carting stone! Look out, will yer! Some of your things, miss?" he added, with gruff courtesy, turning to her. "These yer trunks, for instance?"

She smiled a pleasant assent, and Bill, pushing aside the helper, seized a large square trunk in his arms. But from excess of zeal, or some other mischance, his foot slipped, and he came down heavily, striking the corner of the trunk on the ground and loosening its hinges and fas-

tenings. It was a cheap, common-looking affair, but the accident discovered in its yawning lid a quantity of white, lace-edged feminine apparel of an apparently superior quality. The young lady uttered another cry and came quickly forward, but Bill was profuse in his apologies, himself girded the broken box with a strap, and declared his intention of having the company "make it good" to her with a new one. Then he casually accompanied her to the door of the waiting-room, entered, made a place for her before the fire by simply lifting the nearest and most youthful passenger by the coat collar from the stool that he was occupying, and, having installed the lady in it, displaced another man who was standing before the chimney, and, drawing himself up to his full six feet of height in front of her, glanced down upon his fair passenger as he took his waybill from his pocket.

"Your name is down here as Miss Mullins?" he said.

She looked up, became suddenly aware that she and her questioner were the centre of interest to the whole circle of passengers, and, with a slight rise of color, returned, "Yes."

"Well, Miss Mullins, I 've got a question or two to ask ye. I ask it straight out afore this crowd. It 's in my rights to take ye aside and ask it — but that ain't my style; I 'm no detective. I need n't ask it at all, but act as ef I knowed the answer, or I might leave it to be asked by others. Ye need n't answer it ef ye don't like; ye 've got a friend over ther — Judge Thompson — who is a friend to ye, right or wrong, jest as any other man here is — as though ye 'd packed your own jury. Well, the simple question I 've got to ask ye is *this:* Did you signal to anybody from the coach when we passed Galloper's an hour ago?"

We all thought that Bill's courage and audacity had reached its climax here. To openly and publicly accuse

a "lady" before a group of chivalrous Californians, and that lady possessing the further attractions of youth, good looks, and innocence, was little short of desperation. There was an evident movement of adhesion towards the fair stranger, a slight muttering broke out on the right, but the very boldness of the act held them in stupefied surprise. Judge Thompson, with a bland propitiatory smile began: "Really, Bill, I must protest on behalf of this young lady" — when the fair accused, raising her eyes to her accuser, to the consternation of everybody answered with the slight but convincing hesitation of conscientious truthfulness: —

"*I did.*"

"Ahem!" interposed the Judge hastily, "er — that is — er — you allowed your handkerchief to flutter from the window, — I noticed it myself, — casually — one might say even playfully — but without any particular significance."

The girl, regarding her apologist with a singular mingling of pride and impatience, returned briefly: —

"I signaled."

"Who did you signal to?" asked Bill gravely.

"The young gentleman I 'm going to marry."

A start, followed by a slight titter from the younger passengers, was instantly suppressed by a savage glance from Bill.

"What did you signal to him for?" he continued.

"To tell him I was here, and that it was all right," returned the young girl, with a steadily rising pride and color.

"Wot was all right?" demanded Bill.

"That I was n't followed, and that he could meet me on the road beyond Cass's Ridge Station." She hesitated a moment, and then, with a still greater pride, in which a youthful defiance was still mingled, said: "I 've run

away from home to marry him. And I mean to! No one can stop me. Dad didn't like him just because he was poor, and dad 's got money. Dad wanted me to marry a man I hate, and got a lot of dresses and things to bribe me."

"And you 're taking them in your trunk to the other feller?" said Bill grimly.

"Yes, he 's poor," returned the girl defiantly.

"Then your father's name is Mullins?" asked Bill.

"It 's not Mullins. I — I — took that name," she hesitated, with her first exhibition of self-consciousness.

"Wot *is* his name?"

"Eli Hemmings."

A smile of relief and significance went round the circle. The fame of Eli or "Skinner" Hemmings, as a notorious miser and usurer, had passed even beyond Galloper's Ridge.

"The step that you 're taking, Miss Mullins, I need not tell you, is one of great gravity," said Judge Thompson, with a certain paternal seriousness of manner, in which, however, we were glad to detect a glaring affectation; "and I trust that you and your affianced have fully weighed it. Far be it from me to interfere with or question the natural affections of two young people, but may I ask you what you know of the — er — young gentleman for whom you are sacrificing so much, and, perhaps, imperiling your whole future? For instance, have you known him long?"

The slightly troubled air of trying to understand, — not unlike the vague wonderment of childhood, — with which Miss Mullins had received the beginning of this exordium, changed to a relieved smile of comprehension as she said quickly, "Oh yes, nearly a whole year."

"And," said the Judge, smiling, "has he a vocation — is he in business?"

"Oh yes," she returned; "he 's a collector."

"A collector?"

"Yes; he collects bills, you know, — money," she went on, with childish eagerness, "not for himself, — *he* never has any money, poor Charley, — but for his firm. It 's dreadful hard work, too; keeps him out for days and nights, over bad roads and baddest weather. Sometimes, when he 's stole over to the ranch just to see me, he 's been so bad he could scarcely keep his seat in the saddle, much less stand. And he 's got to take mighty big risks, too. Times the folks are cross with him and won't pay; once they shot him in the arm, and he came to me, and I helped do it up for him. But he don't mind. He 's real brave, — jest as brave as he 's good." There was such a wholesome ring of truth in this pretty praise that we were touched in sympathy with the speaker.

"What firm does he collect for?" asked the Judge gently.

"I don't know exactly — he won't tell me; but I think it 's a Spanish firm. You see" — she took us all into her confidence with a sweeping smile of innocent yet half-mischievous artfulness — "I only know because I peeped over a letter he once got from his firm, telling him he must hustle up and be ready for the road the next day; but I think the name was Martinez — yes, Ramon Martinez."

In the dead silence that ensued — a silence so profound that we could hear the horses in the distant stable-yard rattling their harness — one of the younger "Excelsior" boys burst into a hysteric laugh, but the fierce eye of Yuba Bill was down upon him, and seemed to instantly stiffen him into a silent, grinning mask. The young girl, however, took no note of it. Following out, with lover-like diffusiveness, the reminiscences thus awakened, she went on: —

"Yes, it 's mighty hard work, but he says it 's all for

me, and as soon as we 're married he 'll quit it. He might have quit it before, but he won't take no money of me, nor what I told him I could get out of dad! That ain't his style. He 's mighty proud — if he is poor — is Charley. Why, thar 's all ma's money which she left me in the Savin's Bank that I wanted to draw out — for I had the right — and give it to him, but he would n't hear of it! Why, he would n't take one of the things I 've got with me, if he knew it. And so he goes on ridin' and ridin', here and there and everywhere, and gettin' more and more played out and sad, and thin and pale as a spirit, and always so uneasy about his business, and startin' up at times when we 're meetin' out in the South Woods or in the far clearin', and sayin': 'I must be goin' now, Polly,' and yet always tryin' to be chiffle and chipper afore me. Why, he must have rid miles and miles to have watched for me thar in the brush at the foot of Galloper's to-night, jest to see if all was safe; and Lordy! I 'd have given him the signal and showed a light if I 'd died for it the next minit. There! That 's what I know of Charley — that 's what I 'm running away from home for — that 's what I 'm running to him for, and I don't care who knows it! And I only wish I 'd done it afore — and I would — if — if — if — he 'd only *asked me!* There now!" She stopped, panted, and choked. Then one of the sudden transitions of youthful emotion overtook the eager, laughing face; it clouded up with the swift change of childhood, a lightning quiver of expression broke over it, and — then came the rain!

I think this simple act completed our utter demoralization! We smiled feebly at each other with that assumption of masculine superiority which is miserably conscious of its own helplessness at such moments. We looked out of the window, blew our noses, said: "Eh — what?" and "I say," vaguely to each other, and were greatly relieved,

and yet apparently astonished, when Yuba Bill, who had turned his back upon the fair speaker, and was kicking the logs in the fireplace, suddenly swept down upon us and bundled us all into the road, leaving Miss Mullins alone. Then he walked aside with Judge Thompson for a few moments; returned to us, autocratically demanded of the party a complete reticence towards Miss Mullins on the subject-matter under discussion, reëntered the station, reappeared with the young lady, suppressed a faint idiotic cheer which broke from us at the spectacle of her innocent face once more cleared and rosy, climbed the box, and in another moment we were under way.

"Then she don't know what her lover is yet?" asked the Expressman eagerly.

"No."

"Are *you* certain it 's one of the gang?"

"Can't say *for sure*. It mout be a young chap from Yolo who bucked agin the tiger[1] at Sacramento, got regularly cleaned out and busted, and joined the gang for a flier. They say thar was a new hand in that job over at Keeley's, — and a mighty game one, too; and ez there was some buckshot onloaded that trip, he might hev got his share, and that would tally with what the girl said about his arm. See! Ef that 's the man, I 've heered he was the son of some big preacher in the States, and a college sharp to boot, who ran wild in 'Frisco, and played himself for all he was worth. They 're the wust kind to kick when they once get a foot over the traces. For stiddy, comf'ble kempany," added Bill reflectively, "give *me* the son of a man that was *hanged!*"

"But what are you going to do about this?"

"That depends upon the feller who comes to meet her."

"But you ain't going to try to take him? That would be playing it pretty low down on them both."

[1] Gambled at faro.

"Keep your hair on, Jimmy! The Judge and me are only going to rastle with the sperrit of that gay young galoot, when he drops down for his girl — and exhort him pow'ful! Ef he allows he 's convicted of sin and will find the Lord, we 'll marry him and the gal offhand at the next station, and the Judge will officiate himself for nothin'. We 're goin' to have this yer elopement done on the square — and our waybill clean — you bet!"

"But you don't suppose he 'll trust himself in your hands?"

"Polly will signal to him that it 's all square."

"Ah!" said the Expressman. Nevertheless in those few moments the men seemed to have exchanged dispositions. The Expressman looked doubtfully, critically, and even cynically before him. Bill's face had relaxed, and something like a bland smile beamed across it, as he drove confidently and unhesitatingly forward.

Day, meantime, although full blown and radiant on the mountain summits around us, was yet nebulous and uncertain in the valleys into which we were plunging. Lights still glimmered in the cabins and few ranch buildings which began to indicate the thicker settlements. And the shadows were heaviest in a little copse, where a note from Judge Thompson in the coach was handed up to Yuba Bill, who at once slowly began to draw up his horses. The coach stopped finally near the junction of a small crossroad. At the same moment Miss Mullins slipped down from the vehicle, and, with a parting wave of her hand to the Judge, who had assisted her from the steps, tripped down the crossroad, and disappeared in its semi-obscurity. To our surprise the stage waited, Bill holding the reins listlessly in his hands. Five minutes passed — an eternity of expectation, and, as there was that in Yuba Bill's face which forbade idle questioning, an aching void of silence also! This was at last broken by a strange voice from the road: —

"Go on — we 'll follow."

The coach started forward. Presently we heard the sound of other wheels behind us. We all craned our necks backward to get a view of the unknown, but by the growing light we could only see that we were followed at a distance by a buggy with two figures in it. Evidently Polly Mullins and her lover! We hoped that they would pass us. But the vehicle, although drawn by a fast horse, preserved its distance always, and it was plain that its driver had no desire to satisfy our curiosity. The Expressman had recourse to Bill.

"Is it the man you thought of?" he asked eagerly.

"I reckon," said Bill briefly.

"But," continued the Expressman, returning to his former skepticism, "what 's to keep them both from levanting together now?"

Bill jerked his hand towards the boot with a grim smile.

"Their baggage."

"Oh!" said the Expressman.

"Yes," continued Bill. "We 'll hang on to that gal's little frills and fixin's until this yer job's settled, and the ceremony's over, jest as ef we waz her own father. And, what 's more, young man," he added, suddenly turning to the Expressman, "*you 'll* express them trunks of hers *through to Sacramento* with your kempany's lables, and hand her the receipts and checks for them, so she *can get 'em there.* That 'll keep *him* outer temptation and the reach o' the gang, until they get away among white men and civilization again. When your hoary-headed ole grandfather, or, to speak plainer, that partikler old whiskey-soaker known as Yuba Bill, wot sits on this box," he continued, with a diabolical wink at the Expressman, "waltzes in to pervide for a young couple jest startin' in life, thar 's nothin' mean about his style, you bet. He fills the bill every time! Speshul Providences take a back seat when he 's around."

When the station hotel and straggling settlement of Sugar Pine, now distinct and clear in the growing light, at last rose within rifleshot on the plateau, the buggy suddenly darted swiftly by us, so swiftly that the faces of the two occupants were barely distinguishable as they passed, and keeping the lead by a dozen lengths, reached the door of the hotel. The young girl and her companion leaped down and vanished within as we drew up. They had evidently determined to elude our curiosity, and were successful.

But the material appetites of the passengers, sharpened by the keen mountain air, were more potent than their curiosity, and, as the breakfast-bell rang out at the moment the stage stopped, a majority of them rushed into the dining-room and scrambled for places without giving much heed to the vanished couple or to the Judge and Yuba Bill, who had disappeared also. The through coach to Marysville and Sacramento was likewise waiting, for Sugar Pine was the limit of Bill's ministration, and the coach which we had just left went no farther. In the course of twenty minutes, however, there was a slight and somewhat ceremonious bustling in the hall and on the veranda, and Yuba Bill and the Judge reappeared. The latter was leading, with some elaboration of manner and detail, the shapely figure of Miss Mullins, and Yuba Bill was accompanying her companion to the buggy. We all rushed to the windows to get a good view of the mysterious stranger and probable ex-brigand whose life was now linked with our fair fellow-passenger. I am afraid, however, that we all participated in a certain impression of disappointment and doubt. Handsome and even cultivated-looking, he assuredly was — young and vigorous in appearance. But there was a certain half-shamed, half-defiant suggestion in his expression, yet coupled with a watchful lurking uneasiness which was not pleasant and hardly becoming in a

bridegroom — and the possessor of such a bride. But the frank, joyous, innocent face of Polly Mullins, resplendent with a simple, happy confidence, melted our hearts again, and condoned the fellow's shortcomings. We waved our hands; I think we would have given three rousing cheers as they drove away if the omnipotent eye of Yuba Bill had not been upon us. It was well, for the next moment we were summoned to the presence of that soft-hearted autocrat.

We found him alone with the Judge in a private sitting-room, standing before a table on which there were a decanter and glasses. As we filed expectantly into the room and the door closed behind us, he cast a glance of hesitating tolerance over the group.

"Gentlemen," he said slowly, "you was all present at the beginnin' of a little game this mornin', and the Judge thar thinks that you oughter be let in at the finish. *I* don't see that it 's any of *your* d—d business — so to speak; but ez the Judge here allows you 're all in the secret, I 've called you in to take a partin' drink to the health of Mr. and Mrs. Charley Byng — ez is now comf'ably off on their bridal tower. What *you* know or what *you* suspects of the young galoot that 's married the gal ain't worth shucks to anybody, and I would n't give it to a yaller pup to play with, but the Judge thinks you ought all to promise right here that you 'll keep it dark. That 's his opinion. Ez far as my opinion goes, gen'l'men," continued Bill, with greater blandness and apparent cordiality, "I wanter simply remark, in a keerless, offhand gin'ral way, that ef I ketch any God-forsaken, lop-eared, chuckle-headed blatherin' idjet airin' *his* opinion" —

"One moment, Bill," interposed Judge Thompson with a grave smile; "let me explain. You understand, gentlemen," he said, turning to us, "the singular, and I may say affecting, situation which our good-hearted friend here

has done so much to bring to what we hope will be a happy termination. I want to give here, as my professional opinion, that there is nothing in his request which, in your capacity as good citizens and law-abiding men, you may not grant. I want to tell you, also, that you are condoning no offense against the statutes; that there is not a particle of legal evidence before us of the criminal antecedents of Mr. Charles Byng, except that which has been told you by the innocent lips of his betrothed, which the law of the land has now sealed forever in the mouth of his wife, and that our own actual experience of his acts has been in the main exculpatory of any previous irregularity — if not incompatible with it. Briefly, no judge would charge, no jury convict, on such evidence. When I add that the young girl is of legal age, that there is no evidence of any previous undue influence, but rather of the reverse, on the part of the bridegroom, and that I was content, as a magistrate, to perform the ceremony, I think you will be satisfied to give your promise, for the sake of the bride, and drink a happy life to them both."

I need not say that we did this cheerfully, and even extorted from Bill a grunt of satisfaction. The majority of the company, however, who were going with the through coach to Sacramento, then took their leave, and, as we accompanied them to the veranda, we could see that Miss Polly Mullins's trunks were already transferred to the other vehicle under the protecting seals and labels of the all-potent Express Company. Then the whip cracked. the coach rolled away, and the last traces of the adventurous young couple disappeared in the hanging red dust of its wheels.

But Yuba Bill's grim satisfaction at the happy issue of the episode seemed to suffer no abatement. He even exceeded his usual deliberately regulated potations, and, standing comfortably with his back to the centre of the

now deserted bar-room, was more than usually loquacious with the Expressman. "You see," he said, in bland reminiscence, "when your old Uncle Bill takes hold of a job like this, he puts it straight through without changin' hosses. Yet thar was a moment, young feller, when I thought I was stompt! It was when we 'd made up our mind to make that chap tell the gal fust all what he was! Ef she 'd rared or kicked in the traces, or hung back only ez much ez that, we 'd hev given him jest five minits' law to get up and get and leave her, and we 'd hev toted that gal and her fixin's back to her dad again! But she jest gave a little scream and start, and then went off inter hysterics, right on his buzzum, laughin' and cryin' and sayin' that nothin' should part 'em. Gosh! if I did n't think *he* woz more cut up than she about it; a minit it looked as ef *he* did n't allow to marry her arter all, but that passed, and they was married hard and fast — you bet! I reckon he 's had enough of stayin' out o' nights to last him, and ef the valley settlements hev n't got hold of a very shinin' member, at least the foothills hev got shut of one more of the Ramon Martinez gang."

"What 's that about the Ramon Martinez gang?" said a quiet potential voice.

Bill turned quickly. It was the voice of the Divisional Superintendent of the Express Company, — a man of eccentric determination of character, and one of the few whom the autocratic Bill recognized as an equal, — who had just entered the barroom. His dusty pongee cloak and soft hat indicated that he had that morning arrived on a round of inspection.

"Don't care if I do, Bill," he continued, in response to Bill's invitatory gesture, walking to the bar. "It 's a little raw out on the road. Well, what were you saying about Ramon Martinez gang? You have n't come across one of 'em, have you?"

"No," said Bill, with a slight blinking of his eye, as he ostentatiously lifted his glass to the light.

"And you *won't*," added the Superintendent, leisurely sipping his liquor. "For the fact is, the gang is about played out. Not from want of a job now and then, but from the difficulty of disposing of the results of their work. Since the new instructions to the agents to identify and trace all dust and bullion offered to them went into force, you see, they can't get rid of their swag. All the gang are spotted at the offices, and it costs too much for them to pay a fence or a middleman of any standing. Why, all that flaky river gold they took from the Excelsior Company can be identified as easy as if it was stamped with the company's mark. They can't melt it down themselves; they can't get others to do it for them; they can't ship it to the Mint or Assay Offices in Marysville and 'Frisco, for they won't take it without our certificate and seals; and *we* don't take any undeclared freight *within* the lines that we 've drawn around their beat, except from people and agents known. Why, *you* know that well enough, Jim," he said, suddenly appealing to the Expressman, "don't you?"

Possibly the suddenness of the appeal caused the Expressman to swallow his liquor the wrong way, for he was overtaken with a fit of coughing, and stammered hastily as he laid down his glass, "Yes — of course — certainly."

"No, sir," resumed the Superintendent cheerfully, "they 're pretty well played out. And the best proof of it is that they 've lately been robbing ordinary passengers' trunks. There was a freight wagon 'held up' near Dow's Flat the other day, and a lot of baggage gone through. I had to go down there to look into it. Darned if they had n't lifted a lot o' woman's wedding things from that rich couple who got married the other day out at Marysville. Looks as if they were playing it rather low down.

don't it? Coming down to hardpan and the bed rock — eh?"

The Expressman's face was turned anxiously towards Bill, who, after a hurried gulp of his remaining liquor, still stood staring at the window. Then he slowly drew on one of his large gloves. "Ye did n't," he said, with a slow, drawling, but perfectly distinct, articulation, "happen to know old 'Skinner' Hemmings when you were over there?"

"Yes."

"And his daughter?"

"He has n't got any."

"A sort o' mild, innocent, guileless child of nature?" persisted Bill, with a yellow face, a deadly calm, and Satantic deliberation.

"No. I tell you he *has n't* any daughter. Old man Hemmings is a confirmed old bachelor. He 's too mean to support more than one."

"And you did n't happen to know any o' that gang, did ye?" continued Bill, with infinite protraction.

"Yes. Knew 'em all. There was French Pete, Cherokee Bob, Kanaka Joe, One-eyed Stillson, Softy Brown, Spanish Jack, and two or three Greasers."

"And ye did n't know a man by the name of Charley Byng?"

"No," returned the Superintendent, with a slight suggestion of weariness and a distraught glance towards the door.

"A dark, stylish chap, with shifty black eyes and a curled-up merstache?" continued Bill, with dry, colorless persistence.

"No. Look here, Bill, I 'm in a little bit of a hurry — but I suppose you must have your little joke before we part. Now, what *is* your little game?"

"Wot you mean?" demanded Bill, with sudden brusqueness.

"Mean? Well, old man, you know as well as I do. You 're giving me the very description of Ramon Martinez himself, ha! ha! No — Bill! you did n't play me this time. You 're mighty spry and clever, but you did n't catch on just then."

He nodded and moved away with a light laugh. Bill turned a stony face to the Expressman. Suddenly a gleam of mirth came into his gloomy eyes. He bent over the young man, and said in a hoarse, chuckling whisper: —

"But I got even after all!"

"How?"

"He 's tied up to that lying little she-devil, hard and fast!"

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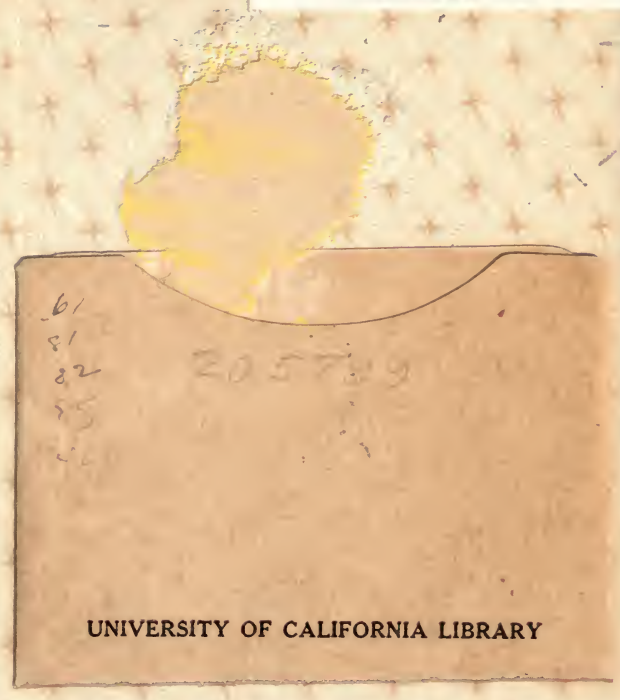

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